

時雨沢恵一  
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト…黒星紅白  
ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

# リリアと トレイズ VI

私の王子様〈下〉



電撃文庫

# リリアと トレイズ

## V

私の王子様へ上

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リリア・シュルツ

十六歳。  
ロクシアーク連邦(東側)首都に住む上級学校三年生。母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。本名はとても長い。



アリソン・シュルツ

三十五歳。  
ロクシェ空軍大尉。現在はテスト飛行士として活躍中。首都のアパートで娘リリアと二人暮らし。寝起きは相変わらずとても悪い。



トラヴァス少佐

三十五歳。  
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合(西側)の軍人。大使館に勤める駐在武官で秘密情報部員。要するにスパイ。アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、正体は……。

トレイズ

十七歳。  
フランチェスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。イクス王国の王子だが、諸事情により王子ではない。メリエル王女は双子で、どちらが年上かと係争中。正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



マティルダ王女

二十歳。  
ベゼル王家の長女にして次期女王。公式訪問でロクシェを訪れるが……。



フランチェスカ女王  
(フィオナ)  
& ベネディクト

三十八歳と四十三歳。  
イクス王国の現女王と、“壁面発見の歴史的英雄”だったその夫。イクス王国にてのんびりと生活中。



**Lillia Schultz:** 16 years old. A fourth-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying aeroplanes. Her full name is extremely long.

**Treize:** 17 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize is a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevent him from claiming royal status. He and his sister Meriel constantly argue about which one of them is the older twin. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, but she does not know his true identity.

**Allison Schultz:** 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

**Major Travas:** 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

**Queen Francesca (Fiona) & Benedict:** 38 and 42 years old, respectively. Francesca (Fiona) is the current Queen of Ikstova, and Benedict her husband is the Hero of the Mural. They are currently living a relaxed life in Iks.

**Princess Matilda:** 20 years old. She is the eldest daughter of the royal family of Bezel, and will one day become queen. She comes to Roxche on an official visit, but...

私の王子様へ上  
リリアと  
トレイズ  
V

C O N T E N T S

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71 第二章「春休みが始まって——」  
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139 第四章「ヒルダとリリア」  
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## **Prologue**

**The beginning of the year 3304 of the World Calendar. A home in a certain valley in Ikstova (the Kingdom of Iks).**

“Anyway, Treize, it looks like you’ve made it safely to your 15th birthday. Congrats. On that note, Her Majesty the Queen shall grace you with her voice. Are your ears ready? Is your heart ready?”

“Huh? What the heck, Father? —What is it, Mother? ...Oh, she might not hear us cause she’s in the kitchen.”

“Hey, get serious. The queen’s going to speak to you.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position to be saying that, Father. Lounging in front of the fireplace, munching on an apple.”

“You know what? What the heck. Fi! Treize is listening!”

“One minute! Let me just finish wiping this plate!”

“Thank you.”

“I should be asking *you* to get serious, Father. And is this really the best time? Meriel’s not here.”

“It’s fine. Actually, we wanted to tell you when she wasn’t around.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here, I brewed some tea. With lots of jam.”

“Thanks, Fi.”

“Thank you, Mother. What did you want to talk about? If it’s an increased allowance, I have no arguments.”

“We can talk about that later. There was something I wanted to speak with you about when you turned 15.”

“Yes?”

“You know about Princess Matilda of Bezel, right?”

“I’ve heard about her. She’s in line to the Bezelese throne, right? About three years older than me?”

“That’s right. She’s the king’s only child and heir.”

“Huh.”

“C’mon, at least act a little impressed. She’s going to be Sou Be-II’s head of state someday. Sovereign over a land of 300 million people.”

“You shouldn’t expect me to understand that scale when I’ve never lived in Sou Be-II like you, Father.”

“I suppose you’re right. Please continue, Fi.”

“Anyway, Princess Matilda—I mean, the royal family of Bezel—sent me—I mean, the royal family of Ikstova—a proposition.”

“Yeah?”

“They would like for you to marry Princess Matilda.”

“What? Wait. Mother, what do you—”

“They would like for you to marry Princess Matilda.”



“Wha...*what?*”

“You may not know this, Treize, but the royal family of Bezel is having a very difficult time right now trying to find a potential husband for the princess. It’s a very popular issue in Sou Be-Il. There aren’t any suitable men around her age among the high-ranking aristocrats or the royal family of Iltoa. His Majesty the King has many siblings and nephews and nieces, so the line of succession isn’t in any danger even if the princess never marries—but Princess Matilda has always been very popular with the people, ever since she was young. Most people in the West are adamant that she succeeds her father.”

“And they picked me? *Me?* No way. Do they even know about me? The royal family of Bezel, I mean?”

“I sent them an official notice when you were born. Just like I did with Roxche’s Presidential Office.”

“Oh.”

“And half a year ago, they sent a message saying, ‘His Highness Prince Treize—son of Roxche’s only royal family, and a child of the Hero of the Mural—is the perfect match for the princess and the royal family of Bezel’, along with an official envoy. I only spoke with them at the palace, though.”

“Mother! You didn’t...!”

“No. I discussed this with your father, and we agreed that it’s not right for parents to decide who their children should marry. No matter what the circumstance or background.”

“Phew...”

“But...I couldn’t turn down the offer, either.”

“...”

“They asked me then, ‘Has His Highness already pledged his future to someone?’”

“...And what did you tell them?”

“I wasn’t sure how to answer, so I replied, ‘not yet, I don’t think—he’s still a little young to have decided’.”

“That’s a relief...”

“But Treize...if I were to ignore your perspective and weigh the benefits—as queen—as Ikstova’s head of state—I don’t think this engagement is such a bad idea.”

“I understand that.”

“Really, son?”

“Course, Father. A tiny country like Ikstova, forging blood ties with the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa? If I weren’t the prince in question, I’d have signed the petition already. There’s nothing but benefits for Ikstova here.”

“Well said, Treize. I’m proud of you, son! But be honest with us. Your mother and I don’t want to force you into anything. It’s not like the old days, when countries invaded one another over rejected proposals.”

“I...right now... I don’t really know...”

“Of course. Not many people think about marriage at 15. Why, when I was your age, I was more interested in hot older girls—er...sorry. Let’s stay on track. Please continue, Fi.”

“Thank you. Now, Treize. Whatever your choice, you have to make the decision someday. So let me suggest something. Will you listen?”

“Yes. What do you have in mind?”

“We’ll make your 20th birthday a checkpoint of sorts. If you come to us with a girl you’ve pledged your future to before then, I will officially turn down the proposal from Bezel. If not...”

“I understand, Your Majesty. In that event, I will marry into the royal family of Bezel.”

## **Chapter 1: The Many Things That Led Up to That Day**

**The beginning of the year 3306 of the World Calendar. The royal villa outside the city of Kunst.**

“Ah! There you are, Treize! We need to talk!”

“Huh? ...Oh, Meriel. When’d you get back from Sou Be-Il?”

“Just now!”

“You wouldn’t believe what happened on new year’s day. We’re still cleaning up here.”

“I got the report! And good going, serving your country! But that’s not the issue here.

You. Me. My room. Now!”

“What the heck, Meriel? Why do you sound so angry?”

“Now!”

“Good. You’re here. Take a seat, Treize!”

“I’m already sitting. They cleaned up your room really quick, huh? It got off easy compared to mine. There were holes in the radio and everything in my closet—”

“When you turn 20. Is it true?”

“What?”

“Answer the question!”

“I, er... I didn’t hear a question.”

“Ugh! I’m talking about that engagement. How you’re marrying into the royal family of Bezel once you turn 20. Is it true that you’re going to marry Elder Sister—I mean, Princess Matilda, the future queen—and you’re going to have children who succeed to the throne after her?”

“Where’d you hear that? Oh. So she told you in person.”

“It’s true, then? Is it true? ...Oh...so it is...”

“Why do you look so disappointed? It’s not set in stone yet.”

“...What did you just say?”

“‘It’s not set in stone yet’.”

“Why not?”

“You’re missing something important. I’m not automatically marrying her when I turn 20. That’s only going to happen if I can’t find someone else to marry before that.”

“Wha...what...?”

“That’s the grace period Mother gave for Ikstova’s and my future. I considered both my position and the country’s and accepted those terms. That was two years ago, when we turned 15.”

“...”

“Is that all? My future’s going to be decided in the next three years. But I guess everyone has to struggle when they’re young—”

“Marry her!”

“What?”

“Marry Elder Sister! You *have* to, Treize!”





“Huh?”

“You might not be smart enough to understand, or even imagine! But you know what? She’s waiting for you! She’s waiting for *you*, Treize! She’s longing for the day you turn 20, like the next three years are a thousand!”

“...I don’t know what they told you cross-mountain, but—”

“Marry her! Do it! Marry Elder Sister and make her happy! Are you listening to me, you imbecile? Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?!”

“I’m listening. And I understand that you’re madly in love with Princess Matilda.”

“This is a serious conversation, Treize! What are you waiting for exactly? For someone to marry you? As if anyone would understand your position and pledge her future to you!”

“Is that a guarantee? You never know until you try...”

“Oh? So you’ve got your eye on someone? Wait...no way...are you after that Lillianne Schultz girl?”

“...”

“I knew it! It’s not like you know any other girls.”

“None of your business.”

“So that’s how it’s gonna be, eh? Then let me butt in a little further! No girl would ever agree to marry a pessimistic and reserved guy like you! Imagine you’re on the receiving end! ‘I want to escape an arranged marriage by pledging my future to you before I turn 20. Will you marry me?’ You think anyone on this *continent* would say yes? And do you think Lillia will treat you the same once she finds out you’re a prince? How’re you gonna feel when your childhood friend suddenly starts calling you ‘Your Highness?’”

“You have nothing good to say about this, do you? Look. I don’t care. I know you’re on Princess Matilda’s side. And maybe you’re right. But I won’t know how Lillia feels until I’ve asked her. I haven’t told her anything yet. There’s still a chance. The new year’s party didn’t work out, but I am going to settle things properly before I turn 20. So...don’t worry.”

“I’m impressed you’re finally holding your own in an argument, little brother.”

“I’m your *older* brother! ...Anyway, are you all right with this?”

“With what?”

“Say I somehow end up marrying Princess Matilda like you want. Then I’d be the husband of your ‘Elder Sister’. Then you’d have to defer to me. Do you think you will be capable of that, Your Highness?”

“Ugh. Stop talking like that, you dunce!”

“Wow. Is that any way for a princess to be talking?”

“But you know...if you do marry her, I’ll admit you’re the older brother.”

“Huh?”

“But...but...in exchange...”

“Yeah?”

“Make her happy, Treize.”

“...Are you crying?”

“Shut up, you idiot! *You* go to Sfrestus and see how much is riding on her shoulders! Our cozy little monarchy might as well be a toy compared to theirs! Damn it! If only I were a man! Then I could help her bear that burden!”

“...Hey, Meriel. I—”

“I’ll pray for you!”

“Huh? For what?”

“I’ll pray that things don’t work out with you and the girl you propose to!”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘curse’.”

“Shut up. Conversation’s over. Get out of my room!”

“All right. Urgh...”

“Wait.”

“What now?”

“I’m gonna ask you one last thing, Treize. Do you really love Lillia?”

\* \* \*

#### **The 4th day of the fourth month of the year 3306.**

A thin layer of clouds floated across the sky. Buildings covered the flat land below. High-rise condos stood in the distance in the Capital District. Laundry fluttered on the roofs of some of the buildings.

In some time, when the winds began to blow in from the west, spring would arrive upon the land in full force.

A girl sat on the budding grass with the stone school building behind her.

She had long brown hair and light brown eyes. She was wearing a grey jacket and a checkered skirt, which were part of her winter uniform. The little badge on her lapel identified her as a fourth-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

Fluidly, she rose to her feet—

And began to dance.

With her hair aflutter, she traced 30 steps in succession to a brisk waltz rhythm.

And she stopped.

“That is great! Just as expected of Lillia!” someone called from behind.

The brunette called Lillia turned, her long hair dancing. A wry grin came over her attractive features.

“But it’s not like I have a partner.”

On the eastern half of the only continent on the planet was the massive Roxcheanuk Confederation, also known as Roxche.

The 4th Capital Secondary school was in Roxche’s capital, the Special Capital District.

The Special Capital District was a circular area about 30 kilometers in diameter. It had been built when Roxche was first formed. The city center was home to the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, civic centers, and courthouses. Outside the center was a business district crowded with department stores and hotels. Further outside was a residential district full of apartment buildings.



And on the outskirts of the Capital District, in the 9:30 direction, was the 4th Capital Secondary School.

There had been a village there for over 300 years—since before the founding of Roxche—and when the Capital District began to expand, the village had become a part of it as well.

The campus was surrounded by rows of apartment buildings recently built to keep up with demand from the rapidly-increasing population. Limited to five stories, the apartment buildings made for a cold, grey backdrop.

The campus itself was quite large. It was situated in a 3,600-square-meter property gaping like a hole through the apartment complexes.

Because the school was built where the old village's chapel and assembly hall had been, many old, majestic buildings were preserved on campus. They were being used by the school alongside the newer buildings. That was why the campus layout was complicated and there were many courtyards and lawns.

Though the leaves had fallen, large trees lined the grounds. The grassy field was wide enough for two separate soccer games. But there was no one there now, under the grey sky.

Lillia stood by a three-story building at the end of the field with a bitter grin.

"But it's not like I have a partner."

She looked at a black-haired girl in the same uniform, who had walked out through a sliding door.

"Well...something may happen soon," the pigtailed girl said apologetically. She had fair skin and dark eyes, and was slightly taller than Lillia.

"Oh well. Don't worry about me, Meg. You make sure to have fun with Seron. You came a long way to get that far with him," Lillia said, lightly tapping Meg's arm, "Is everyone still practicing?"

Meg nodded and turned to the building she had just left. Through the wide-open doors just 5 meters away, they could see the inside of a classroom.

The desks and chairs had been put away to make room for dance practice. About 20 girls were practicing their footwork. Heat seemed to billow outside.

"Everyone's busy, huh. Since they have dates and all," Lillia said, defeated. Meg tried to encourage her.

In Lillia's gaze were her friend and the large notice behind her head. A sign had been posted on the message board next to the door.

The gliding font described the spring dance party that was to take place on the 13th of the following month.

The spring dance was an annual event steeped in tradition in the Capital District area. It went hand-in-hand with a class that helped young people learn ballroom dances in preparation for their future social lives.

Participants had to be in their fourth year or higher. Students put on dresses and tuxedos and socialized, ate, and danced late into the night with their friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends. They did not have to worry about getting permission from their parents because the event was officially hosted by the school.

But written in a hard, merciless font at the bottom of the notice was a message:  
'Students who have not registered with a date by the 3rd of the fourth month may not attend. NO EXCEPTIONS.'

It was an unbreakable rule steeped in tradition.

Lillia had yet to find a male student to go as her date. Meg, on the other hand, had long since found one.

There was only one month before the deadline.

To make matters worse, spring break began on the 12th and went on until the 1st of the fourth month. The deadline to register was the second day of the new term. It was generally agreed that those who did not find a partner before spring break would not find one in time to register.

Lillia and Meg sighed in unison.

Afterwards, they sat side-by-side on the grass.

With their gaze on the grey sky and their ears listening to the excited chatter of their classmates, they spoke.

"Spring break. I decided go to a trip on the Casna Coast with my family. And you, Lillia?"

"Well...nothing set in stone so far," Lillia said in Bezelese for Meg's convenience.

"'Nothing set in stone so far'... That's a new Bezelese phrase for the day," Meg smiled. Then she looked at Lillia. "What about Iks? Not this time?"

Lillia shrugged.

"Nope. I don't normally go for spring break—it's a lot of time and money. And there was that big mess at the new year's party."

"I see... You know, it would be so nice if your friend Treize was a student here. Just a thought," Meg said solemnly, trying to sound as natural as possible to hide the fact that she had thought hard before saying this.

But,

"What? Treize? You're right. I could just drag him along if he were at this school," Lillia replied nonchalantly, "But that won't happen. Treize has a lot of love for Iks. He's patriotic. Anyway, he's not leaving the place."

"I see...that's too bad," Meg replied, falling into thought. Lillia was entirely, completely oblivious to her intentions.

"Don't worry about it!"

"Huh?"

"Meg, you're considerate of others to the point that you get depressed *for* them. You have to try and enjoy your own happiness. I bet your primary school teachers wrote that stuff on your report card too, right?" Lillia said, frowning.

"You're right. I'm sorry, Lillia. I'll try to fix that. I swear!" Meg replied brightly.

"All right! ...Spring break, huh. Mom's schedule isn't set yet. So we might end up going someplace in Roxche the moment she gets her schedule. Mom likes traveling too, so she likes going to places using work as an excuse. She's even come home sometimes saying, 'We're leaving for this place tomorrow!'"

“It would be really nice if you got to travel. Bring back some souvenirs.”

“Yeah. You too.”

Staring out at the grassy field, they bumped fists as a symbol of a promise.

“Hey, you two? We’re done practicing.”

A classmate called from behind. Lillia thanked her, then said quietly, still sitting on the grass, “I wish Mom would just go ahead and do it.”

Meg looked at Lillia again. Lillia looked into the sky.

“I wish she’d just marry the major.”

“...The man from the embassy, you mean.”

“Yeah. She went out with him recently, and she sounded so happy when she told me about it. Mom’s always young at heart, but she’s even more lively when she’s talking about the major.”

“Lillia, how would you feel if she remarried? Would it bother you because of your father?”

Lillia shook her head firmly. “Not at all. It’s always been just me and Mom, as far as I can remember. In primary school, one of the teachers was really nice to me because she assumed I was lonely, but it doesn’t feel strange at all cause he was never around. You know how you have two little brothers, but no older siblings? But that doesn’t make you lonely, right?”

“Yeah... I feel like I could understand, or maybe not.”

“I’m all grown up now—mostly, I guess, but still grown up—so I want Mom to find her own happiness. And you know, I think I could move into the dorms now. It sounds like fun, living with other students.”

“I see,” Meg mumbled softly, looking at Lillia’s smiling face. Then she quickly rose to her feet and held out her hand. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

Lillia took Meg’s hand and pulled her along. It looked like they were dancing toward the doors, but the steps were simply glorified pulling.

\* \* \*

While Lillia danced with Meg, Lillia’s mother, Allison Whittington Schultz, was taking a phone call in her apartment.

<Schultz residence.>

<Hi Allison. It’s Treize. It’s been a while.>

<Oh my. Hello, Treize.>

<Are you all right to talk? I know it’s daytime, but I was hoping you might have a moment.>

<Yes, I’m fine.>

<That’s good to hear. It’s about what we talked about before—Lillia’s spring break—and I’m really sorry to say this, but I don’t think I could see you even if you came to Ikstova.>

<Oh dear.>

<I’m really sorry. We’re having a guest over...>



<Hm. Just out of curiosity, is this guest of yours a VIP? We got word at work yesterday—nothing concrete—but it said, ‘VIP visiting. All flights over the Capital District grounded’.>

<Yes. You’re probably on the right track.>

<That’s too bad. I was just about to make plans. I was thinking about going to Iks this time, too. After the mess that happened this winter...>

<I’m so sorry. I’m an idiot.>

<You got that right. C’m on, Treize! Step up your game!>

<Yes, ma’am! On that note, how about the mouth of the Lutoni River? The North Sea’s famous for prawn and scallops. The crab’s great, too.>

<I’ve never been there myself, but it sounds nice. But can you make it?>

<If I take the train from Elitèsa for work—if I do—I’ll disembark at the North Sea. I can’t tell you the details, but after my job’s done we could—>

<I see. You can’t talk about it now. I’ll call you on a safe line at the base later. How about around this time tomorrow? Is that all right with you? I have tomorrow off, but I’ll be at the base.>

<That sounds fine. I’ll be here all day tomorrow.>

<Then give me the details then.>

<Of course. We’ll talk more tomorrow. ...Actually, I wanted to ask you something. But I’m not sure it’s all right for me to ask.>

<What is it?>

<Well...I understand the situation, but...what is it like? Being separated from your husband in ‘heaven’?>

<Hm...I don’t think it was the best choice for everyone involved, but it’s not painful.>

<I see. ...Isn’t it lonely?>

<No. We stuck together enough for a lifetime back when he was in university. I’m not sure I could talk about it right now, though. It’s a long story. Wanna hear it?>

<No thank you.>

<Right now, he’s doing what he really wants to do. And if living like this is my way of supporting him as his wife, I’m happy.>

<...What is it exactly that he wants to do?>

<I guess you could say...he wants to protect the world.>

<To protect the world...>

<Yeah. Since he made a choice that changed the world, he feels responsible. So he’s doing what he can to guide it in a better direction. With the power he gained for that goal.>

<I see... I’ve always been wondering what I could do for Ikstova, Allison. Do you think I should cherish that above all?>

<I can’t answer that question, Treize. Nor could he. The answer always depends on the person.>

<I see. I’m sorry.>

<All I can say is... When the person next to you nods with a smile when you make that decision, you’ll be the happiest man in the world. I guarantee it.>

<...>

<Don’t worry. You’ve still got three years.>

<Yes. Thank you, Allison.>

<Then I'll call you tomorrow about spring break.>

<Yes. Thank you. ... Would you like to speak to Mother and Father then as well?>

<Oh, yes please. Give them my regards. See you!>

\* \* \*

The moment Allison put down the receiver, gunfire resounded in a place about 100 kilometers from the Capital District.

It was a very unusual location. Roxche was a flat land famous for its lack of mountains, but in the middle of one barley field common to the East was a deep depression.

The depression was about 1 square kilometer wide and 2 meters deep. The base was almost completely flat. The edges were lined with sandbags piled up in a 45-degree angle to prevent the pit from collapsing in heavy rain. There was also a 3-meter-high wall of dirt all around the boundary.

It was not a natural formation by any definition—once a reservoir built by human hands about 400 years ago, it had stored water irrigated from a nearby river to use for farming.

But 80 years ago, a new canal had been built and the flow of the river was altered. The reservoir lost its source and ended up a dried-out pit.

The Roxchean government considered ways to make use of the reservoir, eventually deciding to make it into a military shooting range. The dirt walls prevented rounds from escaping outside and kept prototype weapons safe from prying eyes.

The pit was divided east and west. The western side was an outdoor range with the ground exposed to the air. Built on the eastern side was a training center lined with portable buildings for indoor practice. There was also a close-range shooting range built under a roof.

Metal guard towers had been erected at the four corners of the pit, and tiny house-like buildings were under each. Beside them were lines upon lines of armories that looked more like barns.

It was cloudy that day. Out in the open air, at the southern end of the outdoor range, stood three men.

“Loading!” a suit-clad man in his late twenties cried in Bezelese, and knelt on the damp ground. He did not mind that his pants got dirty. The man began to switch magazines.

Gunshots roared from either side of the man. Two men, both in their forties, were about 5 meters to his left and right, shooting at a target ahead. One of the men was tall and well-built. The other was rather slight. Both were dressed like businessmen, and both were wearing small earmuffs.

Smoke rose from two 90-centimeter-long rifles. They were of an identical model with a long, curving magazine sticking out of the bottom, a stock that looked like a bent lead pipe, and a pistol-like grip.

The rifles had both single-shot and automatic fire functions that could be toggled with a selector. These weapons were called assault rifles and were different from machine guns.

Each of the men fired one bullet at a time, but in rapid succession.

The rounds were driven straight into the human-shaped targets about 40 meters ahead. The targets fell loudly as sparks flew.

By the time the man in the middle was back on the ground, over 30 targets had fallen one after the other.

The man in his twenties quickly locked the curved magazine into the rifle, operated the lever on the bolt with his left hand to load, and raised his voice.

“Locked and loaded!”

He got down on one knee and took aim. That was when he realized that there wasn’t a single target left.

“Huh? Is it over?” he asked, his tone dropping.

“Yes.” “Yes,” the men on his either side replied in unison. Smoke rose in wisps of white from the heated barrels of their guns, still pointed at the targets.

“Tch. Session complete.”

With no targets to shoot down, the man armed the safety and stood.

About 2 meters behind the three men was a table. It was about 5 meters from the southern edge of the pit.

Benches were on either side of the table, and atop it were many ammunition cases and extra magazines, along with two more assault rifles of the same models with their stocks folded. There were also several water bottles and a small portable radio.

Two men stood behind the table.

They were also wearing suits, unusually for the setting. Both men were in their mid-thirties. One was a sharp-eyed man with the bearing of a hardened veteran, with his hair cropped short. In contrast, the other was a bespectacled man who looked very much like a scholar.

“It looks good, Major,” the sharp-eyed man said to the bespectacled man in Bezelese, holding out a stopwatch.

The man addressed as ‘major’ nodded warmly.

Major Travas of the Sou Be-Il Royal Army, who worked at the embassy in Roxche, looked at the three men returning with their magazine-less guns slung over their shoulders.

“It’s great. The automatic function is a plus, too.”

“I expected nothing less from Roxche. If nothing else, they’ve got us beat on firearms and cannons.”

Major Travas nodded in agreement as the three men put down their rifles and magazines on the table.

“It’s an excellent model.”

“It’ll come in handy and boost firepower. Although it’s going to take some time for me to get used to working without a magazine catch.”

“I’d almost like to take three or so home as souvenirs. I want to let my cousin have a try—the one who taught me to use guns, you know? Could I get them gift-wrapped?”

Then, the man who spoke last—the youngest of the men—cheerfully asked the major to join them on the range.

“All right.”

Major Travas picked up the radio and brought it to his mouth, then pressed the talk button.

<All six of us will be shooting this time. Please raise 100 targets at random, with maximum distance at 400 meters. I will raise and lower my left hand as a signal. Over.>

About three seconds after the request, which Major Travas made in Roxchean, a male voice replied.

<Understood.>

Major Travas spoke into the radio again.

<Did you hear that, Axe? Everything 200 and up are yours. Over.>

A second later came the voice of a woman. She spoke in Bezelese.

<Yes, sir. Preparations complete on this end. I'm ready anytime. End transmission.>

"Good. Get ready," Major Travas said.

The five men picked up the heavy, loaded magazines and put them into the pockets of their jackets and pants. Each took five magazines in total, then picked up a rifle and unfolded the stock. The men stood shoulder-to-shoulder, then spread about 5 meters apart and walked forward. When they reached a point littered with dark green shell casings, they came to a stop.

"Magazines."

The moment Major Travas gave the command, the men attached the magazines. They disarmed the safety and operated the lever, loading the first round into the cartridge chamber at the very back of the gun. All that was left was to pull the trigger.

"Leave some for me this time," said the man in his twenties.

"Then don't shoot like an imbecile," someone replied.

There was nothing but soggy dirt before them. The empty field stretched on for a kilometer.

"We're good to go. The targets, please."

In the southeastern guard tower was a soldier behind a pane of bulletproof glass, watching Major Travas and the others through a pair of binoculars.

He was wearing a green Roxchean uniform. Behind him were four similarly-dressed men.

Two of the men—who were younger and of lower ranks—were seated and staring at the machine before them. The other two, who were middle-aged officers, watched Major Travas's team through binoculars.

The two young soldiers reached over to the switches littering the machine before them.

The machine was reminiscent of a piano with a control panel. They were arranged in a 10x10 grid formation with 100 switches to each operator. In front of each switch was a small lamp.

When the switches were toggled, the targets on the range stood upright and the green lamps turned on. And once the targets were shot down, the green lights turned red and the operators could count how many targets had been shot down.

It was up to the operators to decide which targets at which distances to raise. The vertical axis corresponded to distance and could go up to 800 meters. The numbers on the left side indicated that the switches were currently calibrated to 20 to 400 meters, as they were instructed.

There was a dial on the upper side of the switchboard, set to 100. It prevented the soldiers from accidentally raising any more targets once they had reached that number.



Ahead of Roxche's newest target machine, through the round frame of the binoculars, Major Travas slowly raised his left hand.

Someone else was watching through a lens the sight of Major Travas raising his hand.

There was a crosshairs running through the middle of the lens, with three pointed shapes at the center.

It was a telescopic sight. The shooter would line up the target with one of the shapes at the center of the lens, depending on the distance. On the bottom left was a measure for gauging distance according to human height.

The owner of that scope was dozens of meters behind Major Travas and the others, on a landing a little ways up the southern slope.

She was lying on her stomach on a sheet about the size of a double bed, taking aim with a sniper rifle. A woman in her twenties with black hair, who was also wearing a suit.

The long, thin rifle that had in the past roared in the snowscapes of Iks was set securely on a mound of dirt in front of her. The woman's right eye was pressed hard against the scope. Her left eye, which revealed she had dark irises, was also locked straight ahead.

Next to the rifle was a loaded magazine and a small radio. The cables sticking out of it were connected to her neck and ears.

The crosshairs lined up on Major Travas's back. She disarmed the safety with her right thumb, and in one smooth motion brought her index finger to the trigger. She felt cold metal on her fingertip.

"Don't forget," she said under her breath.

Nineteen years ago.

"Be a good girl now, Axe. I'll be back once I finish a very important mission. Do you remember what I told you before?"

"True to your mission to the very end!"

"There's a good girl! Now, I have a very, very important mission for you to complete."

"I know what it is, Daddy! When you come back, I say 'welcome home!' to you with Mom!"

"That's my darling soldier girl!"

"Hee hee!"

"I'll be back soon, Axe. By the time you wake up tomorrow, I'll be flying east on an aeroplane."

"Come home safe, Daddy."

"I will, Axe. Sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams, Daddy. From tomorrow, I'm gonna say good morning and good night to your picture! Don't forget!"

"You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, Axe. I can't carry around any photos of you when I'm on a mission, but don't worry—I can always remember your beautiful face perfectly. I'll wish you sweet dreams every night."

*“We regret to inform you that Captain Gratz Ansgar passed away in an aeroplane crash while carrying out a mission—”*

Five years ago.

<That was no accident.>

<What? Who is this? Answer, or I’m hanging up.>

<Gratz Ansgar’s death was no accident.>

<... Who are you.>

<That is of no importance. But know that Gratz Ansgar was murdered. His death was covered up to conceal the truth.>

<... Why?>

<Ask the one who killed him.>

<Who?>

<Travas. He will become your direct superior next month.>

<...>

<Beware. And ask yourself this—is it always right to be true to your mission to the very end?>

“Don’t forget.”

She could see Major Travas lower his hand and quickly pick up his rifle.

“Targets!” the soldier watching the process ordered.

The two operators flicked the toggle switches at random.

Human-shaped plates of metal flipped up from the ground.

The men lined up before them took aim at the targets and mercilessly opened fire.

Gunfire resounded through the pit, followed by the piercing noise of metal being punctured.

Two targets rose almost simultaneously before Major Travas, one 40 meters away and the other 80. He shot down both in half a second.

The two targets went down nearly at once. Major Travas did not spare them a glance as he turned his sights to another target. A tiny black dot rose in the distance, about 400 meters away. It was too far for an assault rifle.

A moment later, the air seemed to tear overhead. Then the dot in the distance fell.

Dozens of meters behind Major Travas, a shell casing leapt into the air from the woman’s sniper rifle. She fired the next shot before the casing fell to the ground. Another target went down.

A target stood just 2 meters in front of the large man in his forties. In the blink of an eye he switched to automatic mode and used the recoil as momentum to open continuous fire from the lower left to the target. The rounds seemed to mow down the target, even breaking the wooden mechanism that raised and lowered it.

“Loading!”

There was still one round left in his magazine, but the man quickly removed it and loaded a new one. The men to his either side covered for him, shooting down the targets in his lane as well.

Soon, the man resumed fire. The man in his twenties next to him noted that fact and said flippantly, “Man, I really wish I could give my cousin a taste.”

Three targets rose in succession in front of him. He shot them down to the rhythm of a waltz.

In the guard tower, the gunfire was muffled by bulletproof glass. The lamps on the target machine turned red in quick succession.

“It’s almost disgusting how good they are at this,” one of the Roxchean officers muttered. The two operators flicked switches as quickly as they could, but they had nary a moment to turn green before going red.

“They’re incredible. I’d almost like to ask for lessons.”

Soon, the gunfire ended.

The officer glanced at the target machine.

Every single lamp was red.

“Those monsters.”

\* \* \*

“Thank you for your support. If you’ll excuse us,” Major Travas said to the Roxchean officer who called his team monsters, and boarded a small 12-seater bus.

The smaller 40-something man drove the bus out of the pit. The bus traveled down a road between the fields, spewing black smoke into the air.

Major Travas and his subordinates were scattered comfortably around the seats.

They took sips from water bottles, chewed gum, or stared out the windows as they relaxed.

“I suppose it’s about time,” Major Travas mumbled, just loud enough that Axe could hear him from two rows behind, and stood. “Everyone, attention please.”

He took hold of a handle and spoke loudly, overpowering the sound of the engine. All eyes were on him. The driver slowed down slightly.

“We’ll be coming up with code names for this mission.” Major Travas said.

The man in his twenties, who sat at the very back, cheered. “I’ve been waiting for this!”

When they were on missions, the team made it a rule to address one another by code names they decided on in advance.

“The usual, then? I’ll assign the names.”

Everyone nodded.

Major Travas nodded and pointed at Axe, who sat nearest to him. “Ann.”

“Sir.” Axe nodded.

Major Travas then pointed at the man in his twenties. He was the one who had announced the return of the Capital Crisp Retrieval Squad the previous winter. “Yzma.”

“All right! I’m Yzma now, everyone. Pleased to meet you.”

Then, Major Travas pointed at the sharp-eyed man in his thirties, who had earlier been timing the session. “Uno.”

“Understood.”

Then, the large man in his forties who had wielded the shotgun in the mission to rescue Morseau. “Ed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Finally, the small man driving the bus, who showed no opening whatsoever. “Ozette.”

“Yes, sir. Let’s do this, everyone.”

“As usual, I’ll be ‘Leader’. That is all.”

Yzma raised his hand. “Major Leader! I have a question. Where did you get these names?”

Major Travas smiled. “They were characters in a language textbook I read. From the vowel pronunciation chapter, I think?”

“I see. So is Yzma the young and handsome one?”

Major Travas looked very serious as he replied,

“The gossipy crone.”

“Perfect.” Ozette and Ed said in unison.

\* \* \*

As the bus traveled leisurely down the field, dawn was breaking somewhere in the distant west, in the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. But strong wind and rain covered the sun. The world was dark and noisy.

A building stood in the storm.

Five long, narrow buildings of dark stone stood in a row, and in the middle stood one large building. Sturdy bars were set in every window. Guard towers stood at every corner of the roof. Watching the area with searchlights were men carrying shotguns and rifles.

The complex was encircled by black, 2-meter-high walls. Beyond that was an endless plain dotted with thin patches of grass, with no artificial light in sight. A large paved road led in a straight line down the plain.

This was a high-security prison somewhere in Sou Be-II, the location of which was not public knowledge.

Because there was no death penalty in the West, criminals were given lengthier sentences depending on their crimes.

Those with over 100 years of prison term to their names were brought here to live out their lifespans.

“Prisoner 42. Step outside.”

The door of a solitary confinement cell squeaked open.

Four shotguns were pointed at the cell from beyond the bars before the door was opened. The prison guards were holding at gunpoint a figure lying on the bed just 2 meters ahead. Their fingers were on the triggers.

The small but powerful lamps attached to the sides of the guns illuminated the stone bed.

There lay a man wrapped in a brown blanket.

He was sleeping quietly, his messy hair covering the side of his face. The bright lights landed over his eyes. Ten seconds passed.

“Hm...?”

The man narrowed his eyes in the blinding light and covered his face. Though it was an innocuous series of actions, the guards tensed. The muzzles of the guns touched the metal bars, clattering quietly.

“Prisoner 42. Stand.”

The guard opening the door ordered again. Instead of a truncheon, he held a 50-centimeter knife in his hand and was standing at the ready.

Prisoner 42 slowly stood.

“What is it? It shouldn’t be time for breakfast yet.”

The man shielding his eyes was soft-spoken and polite. He sat on the edge of his bed. He was dressed in a prison uniform with blue and white stripes. Over his right breast was the number 42.

“It’s a transfer. Put these on.”

The guard tossed him a pair of handcuffs. The handcuffs clattered to the floor. They were connected by a chain to a pair of shackles.

“That’s news to me. Although I suppose no one would ever tell me these things anyway.”

Prisoner 42 put up no resistance. He did as he was told in the light of the lamp, putting the shackles—which were just long enough to let him walk—on his ankles and one side of the handcuffs on his left wrist. He did it all with an expert hand.

With his knife at the ready, the guard approached Prisoner 42. His face was stiff and dotted with sweat.

The guard finally secured the other end of the handcuff on Prisoner 42’s right wrist. He made the prisoner hold out his hands, then pulled the chain from the cuffs behind the man’s back and locked it. Only then did the guard sheathe his knife.

The shotguns pulled out of the cell. Prisoner 42 left the cell before the guard. Then he walked down the hall, still held at gunpoint.

“Another psychoanalysis session? I think we’ve all had enough of those.”

“Shut up.”

“Well, I suppose it’ll help me pass the time.”

“I told you to shut up.”

“All right.”

Clattering, Prisoner 42 walked out the doors and into an indoor parking lot. The guard shoved him into the back of a small prison van.

A chair was secured to the center of the cubical compartment. The guards sat the prisoner in the chair, then secured his fetters to the chair with locks.

The police officers who were handed the prisoner sat in each corner of the compartment, facing him.

The rain battered the van as it left the walls, led and flanked by police cars.

“Where are we going?” asked Prisoner 42.

None of the police officers answered.

“I’m still a little drowsy.”



“Then sleep.”

This time, he got an answer. As if on cue, the officers took out objects from the sacks under their feet and put them on their faces.

“Hm?”

Prisoner 42 furrowed his brow. The police officers had put on gas masks with rubber covers and glass windows, with filter canisters near the mouth.

Once all the police officers were ready, one of them took out a large spray can and sprayed it on Prisoner 42.

“Oh... I...recognize this...this smell—”

Prisoner 42's eyes closed and his head fell limp before he had the chance to say what he had realized.

Several hours later.

“Mmm...hm...”

“So you're awake, Prisoner 42.”

“Oh...yes. I had a terrible nightmare. I dreamed that I was taken somewhere and sprayed with bitter sleeping gas.”

“On my orders.”

“Hm? ...Ah! I see. So I'm still asleep.”

“Get a hold of yourself. I have something to discuss with you.”

“Before that, could you do something about these handcuffs and fetters? They're awfully painful.”

“The discussion comes first. Look at me.”

“Right. Yes. ...Hm? What? This is a surprise. I know you. I've never met you, but I know who you are.”

“Is that so? I also know you very well, Prisoner 42.”

“I'm sure. But what do you want with me? Why would someone in your position have the police bring me here? Surely not for breakfast?”

“Of course not. It sickens me to merely speak to an insect like you.”

“That's a little cruel of you. Please don't worry. I wouldn't kill you, even if I weren't bound. The elderly are fated to die soon even if you leave them alone.”

“I have a task for you.”

“I refuse. I am not interested. Please send me back to the comfort of the prison immediately. I would have been enjoying a pleasant breakfast by now if you hadn't brought me here. I am very happy to spend my life there, with the memories of those I loved. I will not do any work. Do you understand? I will not work. Never. I will never work again. Do you understand me?”

“Your task is to kill someone.”

“I suppose I'll have a listen. As you know, I—”

“I know. That is why I am giving you this task. I need you to kill someone of noble birth.”

“Oh?”

“Here. A photo of your target.”

“...Beautiful... Ah...a work of art...”

“Stop dribbling. Your target is in Roxche. You will infiltrate the East as a tourist. You are free to do as you like once the job is complete. I will not question your methods as long as the target dies in Roxche. You will receive a budget. If you remain undetected by the Roxchean authorities, you are free to live as you like in the East. I do not care what you do so long as you never again cross the Lutoni, mother of this earth, and return to our beautiful homeland.”

“All the way in Roxche? This is a surprise. But setting me free and taking me all the way across the border surely could not be easy—”

“I have the power to make that happen.”

“I suppose you do. Someone in your position could do many things. Like bringing me here. You are disgusting. A true villain. It seems like I’m speaking with the devil. I almost want to call the police.”

“Many people would love to take your life, Prisoner 42. I’m almost loath to admit that, in spite of my position, I regret the absence of the death penalty in our land. But now things are different.”

“Very selfish of you.”

“Indeed. Now you must choose. Accept this task, or die here.”

“That’s a pointless question.”

“I suppose it is.”

“Now, what about breakfast? I prefer raspberry jam in my tea and potatoes roasted whole.”

“Enough.”

The man called ‘Prisoner 42’ left the extravagant room, surrounded by guards.

When the large, heavy doors closed, the old man was left alone in the room with a butler. It was still raining heavily outside.

The old man gave an order to the butler, who was younger than he was.

“The telephone.”

Night. The Sou Be-Il embassy in Roxche’s Capital District.

The break room was small, furnished with only a single bed. Major Travas, who was asleep in his uniform shirt, opened his eyes to the internal telephone ringing. The call was from Axe, known currently as ‘Ann’.

<Sorry to wake you, sir. We just received word from Headmaster Aikashia. The lady will be moving as scheduled. Her itinerary will be disclosed today on the morning news.>

<Understood. We’ve got busy days ahead.>

<Yes, sir. But all of us are honored to be taking on this mission.>

<And so am I. We’ll do our best to make sure things go smoothly. I’ll be down shortly.>

Major Travas sat up and reached for his brown uniform jacket.

\* \* \*

The next morning. It was the 5th of the third month, and a holiday. It was cloudy.

A certain piece of news was announced to Roxche, emphasized most heavily in the Capital District.

Princess Matilda of Sou Be-Il would be on an official visit to the Capital district from the 15th to the 19th.

This was the first time in 12 years that the king's family would visit Roxche—the last time was at Natalia Island in the North Sea, where the then-president hosted the first East-West summit in history. But this was the first time in history that a member of the West's royal family would visit the Capital District.

Princess Matilda would fly across the continent on a private aeroplane escorted by a unit from the Confederation Air Force, enjoying the sights of the East. The day after she arrived in the Capital District, she would meet Roxche's president and visit the presidential residence for dinner.

After that, she was scheduled to take a tour of the modern-day city center and the historical quarter, as well as visit art galleries and watch plays at the Grand Theater. But the specifics of her itinerary were top secret. During her visit, the Capital District would be placed under martial law and travel by rail and road would be restricted.

The princess was scheduled to leave the Capital District on the afternoon of the 19th, taking a special express train to Port Watts in the North Sea; there she would oversee the joint rescue training session on the 20th. Afterwards, she would board the massive Royal Navy battleship Ildèsta, which would be on standby at the harbor from two days earlier. Finally, the princess would return to Sfrestus via the North Sea Passage, accompanied by an escort fleet.

In an ordinary kitchen in an ordinary apartment labeled 'Schultz'.

Depending on the weather, Allison could end up being called to work even on holidays. So her daughter Lillia was eating breakfast alone.

There were spots of blue in the sky, but it was mostly cloudy. A gentle westerly wind blew outside.

On the table in the middle of the dining room was a hot sandwich fresh from an electric toaster, with ham and cheese inside. There was also a cup of tea with milk.

Lillia listened to the news on the radio and mumbled absently.

"Huh. So that princess who needs a husband is coming to Roxche..."

She reached for her second sandwich.

In a large, luxurious living room in an expensive apartment labeled 'Strauski'.

The family's daughter and second son were going mad in front of the television.

Meg, who had her hair down, practically clung to the black-and-white TV on the shiny, expensive TV stand.

"I can't believe it! Princess Matilda's coming to Roxche! Why? Why am I not in the Capital District then?! Why?!"

Next to Meg, her primary school-aged brother—10 years her junior—was also in a frenzy.

"Wow! The Ildèsta! 270 meters long with a max speed of 33 knots! It's got nine 40-centimeter cannons! It's the Royal Navy's newest and fastest and strongest battleship and the

flagship of the North Sea fleet! I can't believe it's coming to Roxche! Wow! I wanna go see it! Can we please?!"

A plump, middle-aged woman with long dark hair tied up in a bun stared from her seat on the sofa behind them.

"Obsessed with royalty and the military... I'm sorry, Meg. Johan. But we'll be on the east coast by that point. I heard the halibut meunier's to die for."

"Cancel it!" "Do it later!" Brother and sister cried in unison as they turned. Their mother took a leisurely sip of tea.

"We can't do that. What about the fried dorado? You two were looking forward to it, too."

"But Mom! Princess Matilda's going to be in *Roxche*! This might be the only chance I get to see her before she gets married! We can't be on a relaxing family vacation *now*!"

"Yeah! I don't care about the princess, but the Ildèsta's coming to Roxche! This never happens, you know?"

Meg turned to her brother. "Who cares about your battleships, Johan?"

"Whaddaya mean 'who cares'?"

Meg retorted loudly, from her very soul, "You—you can join the navy later and board the ship whenever you want! They'll treat you really well since you speak Roxchean! But I could never go to the palace and make friends with the princess!"

"Yeah, but..."

"I'll never get to help her, and I'll never get to protect her beautiful smile!"

Slowly, Johan backed away from his sister. She had her hands clasped over her chest, her heart already elsewhere. He went over to the sofa where his mother sat.

Meg dramatically faced west, her hair aflutter.

"Oh, Princess Matilda! I pray your days in Roxche will be peaceful and pleasant! Strauski Megmica shall wish for your happiness in the eastern lands!"

Meg's mother watched incredulously.

"Honey. Please don't tell me you act like this at school."

The Kingdom of Iks.

In the living room of a house in a snowy valley.

"So they've made the announcement."

"Only the official schedule, though."

Fiona—who was taking time off from work—and her husband Benedict were sitting on the floor before a small fireplace. They were speaking in Bezelese.

Both were wearing quilted pajamas. Benedict was even wearing a nightcap, which clashed with his beard. A kettle with water for their morning tea was atop the fireplace.

On the mantelpiece was an old radio, which announced Princess Matilda's itinerary in Roxche. The speaker crackled with age. Next to it was a sparkling-new radio for emergency use, currently turned off.

When the news moved on to another topic, Benedict reached over and turned off the radio.

"Come to think of it, what's Treize up to? I haven't seen him in a few days now. Or was it more?" Benedict wondered. He had little interest in his son's actions.

“He’s at the apartment in Kunst. He said he wanted to practice his marksmanship and combat skills so he can fight off bad guys,” Fiona replied, warming her hands by the fire.

“Hard at work, then,” Benedict mumbled. Still seated, he moved over to Fi and reached out towards the fire. Fiona softly leaned against him.

Two shadows became one in the dark living room. The kettle had yet to whistle. For some time, there was silence.

Benedict finally spoke in Roxchean.

“Anyway, Fi, I have something to say.”

“Yes?”

“I see you have bought a new camera.”

Fiona’s expression stiffened. Two seconds of silence later, she blinked several times and sat upright.

“...Er...how? How did you find out?”

“I received a telegram from the department store in Elitèsa—not to the royal family, but to ‘Ms. Fiona’—saying, ‘Thank you for your patronage. Your item will be shipped shortly’. Warren’s grandson rushed over with this message late last night.”

“...Oh. ...Of all the useless efforts...” Fiona groaned, looking up. Benedict gave her a look.

“Fi?”

“N-no, er...yes. It was very good of him to bring it all this way.”

“Hm...so how many cameras does this make?”

“W-wait! Let me explain. This camera is *different*. It’s so much better than the others!”

“You do not need to explain. My word...” Benedict sighed. Fiona sat up and looked her husband in the eye. Then she said firmly, “Well, you see! I bought the camera for Treize. Yes!”

“Oh?”

“Treize will need one if he’s going to travel. So I bought him one. A half-size 35mm model. It’s perfect for taking pictures on the move!”

“I see. Then when the camera arrives, I will send it directly to Treize.”

“What? ...Yes, of course!”

“And he will not need to return it after his trip, yes?”

“...No. He won’t.”

“Very good. We have forgotten to buy him anything recently. We were so busy early this year that we passed his birthday by. This will be the perfect birthday gift.”

“O-of course. It’s perfect. But...could I maybe borrow it from him sometimes?”

Benedict looked at Fiona.

Fiona pulled back.

“All right. But remember, Fi. A parent should not take their children’s toys.”

“Right. Understood.” Fiona nodded firmly. Benedict smiled.

“Now that the discussion is done, I have one more thing to say. I always say this, but still.”

“Yes.”

“I love you, Fi.”

Without a word, Fiona closed her eyes. The kettle began to whistle as the two kissed.



As Fiona and Benedict exchange passionate kisses—

“Actually... I’m a prince...”

Treize was sleep-talking in Bezelese.

He was in his apartment in Kunst, the capital of Iks.

The tiny room was furnished with a bed, a desk, and a dresser. There was no more room for anything else. There was no bathroom in his apartment—the entire building shared those facilities.

Treize was curled up in his green blankets like a cat.

He squirmed, flipping over, and mumbled again.

This time, in Roxchean.

“Really, I’m serious.”

## **Chapter 2: After Spring Break Began...**

### **The 15th day of the fourth month.**

It was the third day of spring break, and the skies over the Capital District were clear. Footage of the city before Princess Matilda's arrival, the moment of her arrival, and after her arrival was playing on television.

"Geez. It's like they have nothing else to talk about. I wanna watch something else," Lillia grumbled.

It was afternoon. Lillia was sitting alone in the living room, wearing her mother's old sweats—labeled 'Confederation Air Force'—in lieu of pajamas.

Though she complained, Lillia had nothing else to do. She stared at the screen until the TV played a recording of Princess Matilda's press conference.

Cameras flashed everywhere as the princess spoke.

As reporters showered her with questions, she responded with practiced calm—"I sincerely hope that East and West will maintain a relationship forged through friendship and camaraderie", and "I am truly grateful for the Roxcheanuk Confederation's generous hospitality", she said in perfect standard Bezelese before disappearing from the screen.

When the scene switched back to the newscaster, Lillia stretched and turned off the TV.

"Man..." she sighed, resting her chin on the table.

As if on cue, the telephone began to ring. Lillia lazily slid over and picked up the receiver.

"Schultz residence."

She heard her mother's cheerful voice.

<It's decided!>

<Oh. Hey Mom. I haven't talked to you in two days. So what's decided?> Lillia asked. She did not even need to ask how Allison was doing.

<Our trip! I finally got my schedule set. You're pretty free this spring break, right? You don't even need to practice for the dance,> Allison said energetically.

Lillia hung her head. In the end, she had not found herself a date. <Thanks for the reminder, Mom. ...But going on a trip sounds good. Where? When? How?>

<We're going to the North Sea! We'll go to Lor and see the Lutoni Delta area. Apparently we can see tidal bores! And the seafood is really good, I hear.>

Lillia held the receiver between her face and her shoulder as she took out a map from under the end table with the phone. She opened up the large map of the world and set her sights on the mouth of the Lutoni, where the river flowed into the North Sea.

The massive delta the Lutoni and several tributaries flowed into was part of Lor. The region was known for its spectacular tidal bores, where massive waves ran into the river from the sea. Lor's vast coastline and forests, along with its plentiful seafood, was famous as well.

<That sounds great. I've never been to Lor, and I've never seen the mouth of the Lutoni. But isn't it really far? I can already tell it's going to be an expensive trip. What are we taking?> Lillia asked, worried. Going to Lor from the Capital District was essentially crossing half the continent. It involved about as much travel time as going to Iks.

<No worries! We're crossing the continent for free, at least on the way there.>  
<Really?! How?>  
<I'll tell you later, sweetheart. It's going to be great! We'll be gone from the 23rd to the 30th. You're free, right?>  
<So we're leaving in eight days? That's fine with me.>  
<Great! I'll be back home in four days or so. Could you put the suitcase in the shade to dry, please?>  
<Sure,> Lillia said, and hung up. She glanced at the calendar on the wall, then at the board hanging in the kitchen.

Allison: Stuck at the Air Force base for test flights for a while.  
Lillia: Spring break. I'm bored, dammit.

Lillia went over and wrote, '23rd to 30th: Trip to the North Sea! Yes!'  
"Awesome! I'll get all my homework done before then!"  
With a determined cry, Lillia headed to her room.  
She realized then that she was waltzing.  
"Urgh!"  
With a soft groan, she stopped herself and strode down the hall.

\* \* \*

### **The 19th day of the third month.**

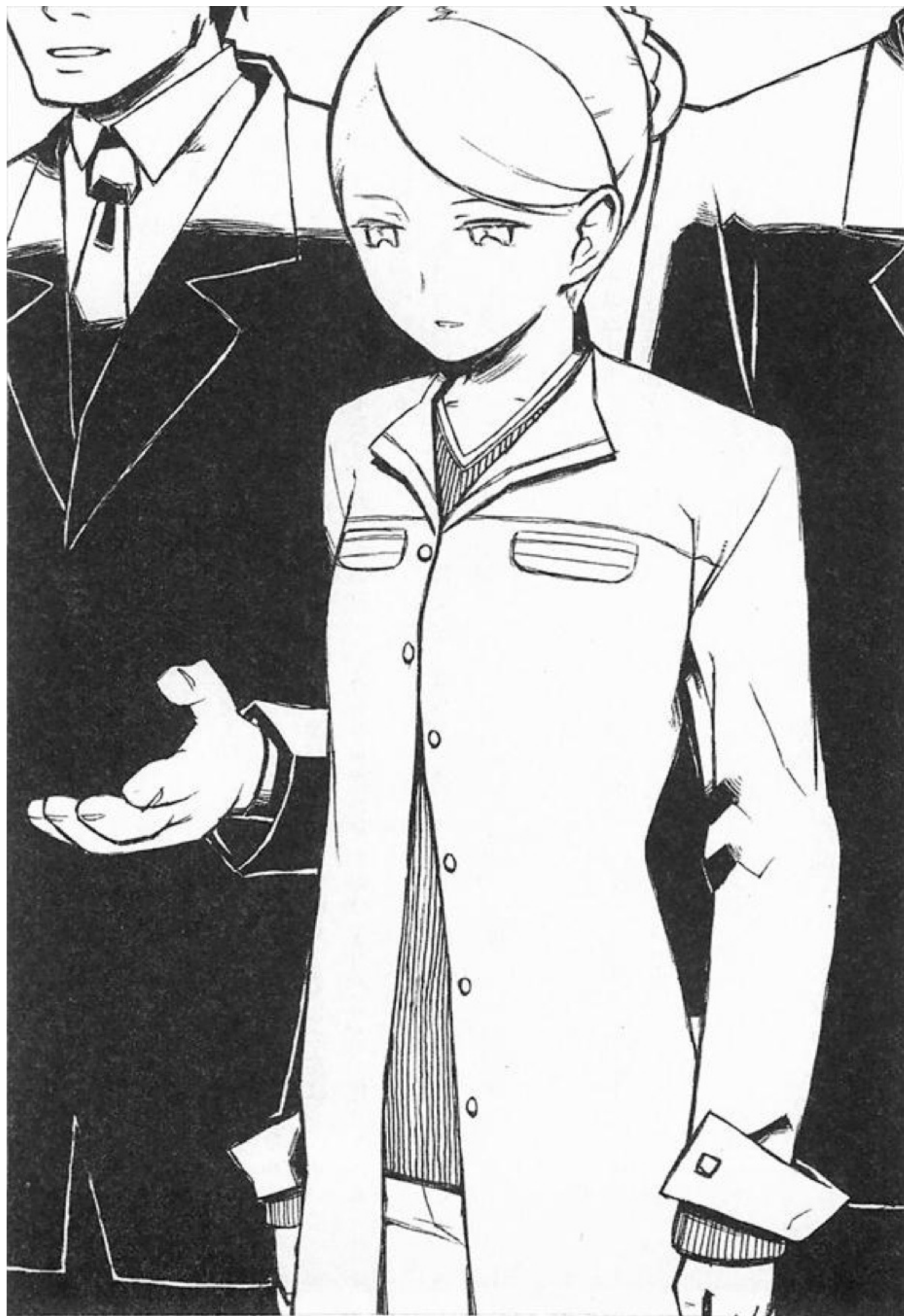
Four days after the telephone call.  
Just as Lillia rushed through the rest of her homework and packed her bags for the trip—  
Just as Allison returned home after being freed from nearly 10 straight days of flying—  
Just as footage of Princess Matilda leaving the Capital District by train was broadcast—  
Major Travas was at a Confederation Air Force base on the outskirts of the Capital District.

The sky was as clear as could be. The wind was calm.  
"It's a perfect day for traveling. Don't you agree, Miss?"  
"It certainly is. The sky is so beautiful today. It reminds me of autumn in Sfreustus.  
Roxche's Capital District is a wonderful place indeed if I can see the lovely autumn sky even in the middle of spring."

Major Travas and a woman were speaking on a wide, flat space, with a long airstrip before them.

Major Travas was in a black suit with a black tie. The woman was in beige pants and a beige jacket over a white V-neck sweater with a modest cut. It was a simple outfit perfect for traveling.

The woman's beautiful blond hair was tied up in a neat bun. She had fair skin and a soft countenance. Her emerald green eyes exuded a gentle aura.



Before them was a runway, and to their right was a small, streamlined aeroplane capable of high-speed cruising. A vehicle mounted with a power generator was parked alongside it. To their left were four men and a woman, all dressed in black suits, standing with their backs to the hangar and the control tower.

They were Major Travas's subordinates. Each of the men was carrying two large suitcases, which could even fit a person inside. The suitcases were stamped with the logo of a famous company, and had four wheels on the bottom for ease of transport. The woman was carrying a brown, 2-meter-long leather golf bag with a cap. The golf bag also had wheels.

"It's time to board, Miss. People are waiting for us on the snow," Major Travas said to the woman, who was staring at the sky. She turned with a smile.

"Of course. Let's be off."

Major Travas led the group, followed by the woman. The subordinates trailed behind as they silently carried her luggage. The wheels on the suitcases seemed to growl against the pavement.

Once all the suitcases had been loaded and the passengers were inside, the aeroplane's two engines roared to life. The propellers began to spin.

The aeroplane taxied into the runway in the otherwise silent airport. And with a loud hum, it took to the clear skies.

Almost immediately, four fighter crafts closed in. The fighters, branded with the emblem of the Confederation Air Force, escorted the aeroplane.

Once the five crafts disappeared to the west-southwest, silence returned to the airport.

\* \* \*

#### **Four days later. The 23rd.**

A spring storm swept the base.

A strong westerly wind was howling endlessly across the plains, and heavy clouds rushed past overhead.

Lillia stood in that midst, astonished.

She was wearing a grey Confederation Air Force flight suit, an aviator hat, and a pair of goggles. She was even wearing a parachute on her back like a knapsack—the very image of a trainee pilot.

To her right stood six large men, dressed just like her. Behind the seven of them was a massive bomber.

The craft had four engines and four propellers. It had a wingspan of 31 meters and was 22 meters long from nose to tail. There was no larger aircraft, with the exception of some seaplanes.

The bomber had no coat of paint—its naked metal frame glinted in the light. The only identification on the body was a barely-visible serial number.

"Men! We are now commencing a trans-Roxche long-distance test flight! We will be covering an unprecedented distance, but I have faith in your abilities and mine!"



Making confident declarations before Lillia was the captain of the aeroplane. Her mother, 35-year-old Captain Allison Whittington Schultz, who was about a head shorter than the first officer next to her.

Allison was listing off all the details they needed to test out on the flight, but Lillia barely paid any attention.

“Crossing the continent for free, huh,” she groaned quietly.

Lillia had to fly for a very long time at the back of the bomber, sitting on a shelf that was originally used for stowing guns.

At times the craft ascended to and cruised at 5000 meters above sea level, which was the highest possible point they could go before needing oxygen masks. Temperatures there were about 30 degrees below zero, in celsius. As the aeroplane had no heating system, everyone onboard had to endure the cold in their heated suits.

Along the way, the other crew members were quite considerate of Lillia. Some expressed their shock or sympathy at her mother’s recklessness.

They suffered through bad weather and overheated engines while stopping to rest or sleep at bases on the way. And a day and a half later, the crew made it to the Confederation Air Force base in the Republic of Niasham.

Niasham was a member state of the Roxcheanuk Confederation, and was situated directly north of the Republic of Raputoa, where Lillia’s father Wilhelm Schultz had attended secondary school. Niasham bordered the Lutoni river and was just south of Lor, a day’s train ride away.

Once they were free from the base, Allison and Lillia drove to a hotel in the city of Karen.

Lillia changed into her pajamas the moment she entered the room and collapsed into bed. Allison hung up her uniform.

“It’ll be a normal train trip from tomorrow on. We have to catch the morning train, so I’ll be waking you up early, sweetheart.”

“Uh huh. Whatever. I’m beat...”

And Lillia fell right asleep.

It was the night of the 24th.

At the same time, a tearjerking farewell was taking place in a darkened station hundreds of kilometers to the south.

As the name suggested, Elitèsa Station was in the city of Elitèsa at the southern tip of the Republic of Raputoa. The Kingdom of Iks was not accessible by rail; this was the nearest station to the kingdom where long-distance trains stopped.

Snowflakes whipped into the platform from the side of the massive dome. A train was stopped amidst glowing orange lights.

At the front of the train was a yellow diesel engine locomotive. Behind it were seven passenger cars painted green with white lines, followed by two freight cars.

And in the middle of the platform,

“I will come to visit, I promise! I will let nothing stop me! Farewell, Elder Sister! Be well! I will send mother’s photographs to you as soon as they are developed!”

Meriel was choking back sobs. She was a 17-year-old girl with back-length hair, dressed in simple green winter clothes and a wool hat.

The woman standing before her comforted her in Bezelese.

“Of course. Come visit me anytime, Meriel. I am looking forward to the photographs. And I am truly grateful for Ikstova’s hospitality. Take care.”

She was a blond woman wearing an expensive-looking navy wool coat.

Around them were five people dressed in black suits and coats, all cautiously securing the area. There was no one else on the platform save for the conductor, who was glancing at his wristwatch. The blond woman’s group had bought all the tickets for this train and would be the only passengers onboard.

Yet the team of five never once let down their guard. With each gust of wind, the coats of the two tallest men billowed, revealing bulging masses under their arms. They were carrying assault rifles with folded stocks in lieu of handguns.

There were also several men dressed in winter clothes like Meriel’s standing by at the edge of the platform. They were members of Ikstova’s royal guard.

“It’s time, Miss.”

The door of the train opened, and Major Travas—also wearing a suit—came down the stairs. The woman embraced Meriel, who also wrapped her arms around her.

Once they broke away,

“You’d better do your job right!” Meriel ordered Treize, who wore a leather jacket with a hood. He had stepped outside after Major Travas. “You can’t be a numbskull anymore, okay?”

Treize nodded with a wry look.

“Here,” he said, holding out his hand as the woman went to the steps.

“Thank you,” the woman replied in Roxchean, reaching over and placing her slender fingers on Treize’s hand. She allowed herself to be helped up the steps. When the woman turned, she saw Meriel waving lightly from the platform. The woman seemed sad to see Meriel, who gave a tearful smile, but stepped inside.

Major Travas lightly bowed to Meriel once the woman and his subordinates were on the train.

“Please take care of Elder Sister, Mr. Hero.”

“Of course, Your Highness. My team and I will protect her with our lives,” Travas replied, looking round at the royal guard walking over to escort Meriel.

“And also...give my foolish younger brother a good kick in the pants for me. Show him no mercy!” Meriel said viciously. Major Travas’s eyes narrowed.

“If I get the chance, Your Highness. But please remember—this is his decision to make.”

“Yes...you’re right.”

Meriel offered Travas a handshake. He took it.

“I respect you so much, Mr. Hero. I would follow in your footsteps, if only I could.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. But you have a nobler, heavier responsibility ahead of you.”

They withdrew their hands, smiling. Then, Major Travas stepped into the passenger car and closed the door.

Leaving Meriel on the platform, surrounded by the royal guards, the train whistled to a start. The locomotive slowly pulled the cars forward and the wheels began to creak over the rails.

The curtains on the cars were all closed. Like a large black mass the train left Elitèsa Station.

An icy gust swept through the platform. Meriel watched the train depart, until the tiny red taillight was swallowed up by the darkness.

\* \* \*

### **The 25th day of the third month.**

Morning came to Karen East Station.

Sunlight seeped through the clouds and into the arch-shaped station through its glass roofs, casting light on the patterned tiles on the floor.

From early in the morning, the station was packed with passengers commuting to school and work. The Schultz family was among that throng.

Lillia wore a bright green sweater and a red tartan skirt, along with brown tights and short boots. She had her hair down.

Allison was in a dull brown turtleneck. It was one of her favorites, originally supplied by the Air Force. She also wore cotton pants and comfortable leather pumps. As usual, Allison had her hair tied up in a bun. Mother and daughter both carried travel bags with their jackets hung over them.

“Feeling rested, honey?”

“Yeah. I got plenty of sleep. What about you, Mom?”

“All good here. It was only a day and a half of flying.”

“*Only* a day and a half? You’re tough.”

“The weather forecast says it’ll clear up over time today. It’s perfect for a train trip. Let me go get the tickets.”

Allison went to the ticket booth and purchased the long-distance train tickets she had reserved. The Schultz family was to take a train from Karen East Station to Lor Central Station in Lor, at the mouth of the Lutoni river. They had tickets to a first-class sleeper cabin. The train would leave that morning and travel north all day, finally arriving at Lor Central Station the next morning, on the 26th.

For a short time Allison and Lillia waited in the dome, warm with the presence of people. But eventually, they put on their jackets and stepped out onto the platform. They gave their bags to an employee with a metal cart and handed him a tip. Then they left the dome and followed the cart across the tracks.

The platforms were all bustling with commuting students. Platform 6 was opposite Platform 1. Mother and daughter waited under a recently-built roof for their train.

The station was surrounded completely by a residential district. Beyond the roundabout in front of the station was a veritable jungle of apartment buildings. Patches of snow remained on the roofs.

“Things sure have changed. I came here once before—years ago—and there was absolutely nothing here then,” Allison said, her eyes relaxing.

Lillia nodded indifferently. She did not ask when her mother had come here, or with who.

“Things sure have changed,” Allison said again.

Soon, an announcement came over the platform.

The long-distance sleeper train from Elitèsa Station bound for Lor Central Station, the announcement said, was due to arrive soon—exactly on schedule.

“Trains never used to come on time. Times have changed,” Allison noted.

Three other people on the platform were boarding the same train. Two middle-aged businessmen wearing suits, and a middle-aged woman carrying a large piece of luggage wrapped in cloth—perhaps she was a saleswoman.

The crosswalk alarm began to ring, and headlights drew near. Soon, the train approached. It was a 10-car train with a yellow diesel engine in the lead.

There was one VIP car in the train, just behind the locomotive. It consisted of two cabins.

Then there was one first-class sleeper car, with five 2-passenger cabins.

After that was a dining car with large windows, with a small kitchen in the back left corner.

Following that were two second class cars, each with 10 partitioned 4-passenger cabins where the seats could be converted into beds. All cars with cabins had the corridor on the left side of the car.

Then came two second class cars, each with partitioned 4-passenger booths. That was all for the passenger cars. They were all colored green with the windows outlined in white.

The last two cars were covered freight cars used to transport post and regular shipments of products, not passenger luggage.

The train slowly wound into the station platform, coming to a stop on the left side of the one where Lillia and Allison stood.

They could see passengers here and there through the open curtains. Some were having breakfast in the dining car.

“You know what to do, Lillia.”

“Right.”

Lillia stepped inside alone and went into their cabin. Then she opened the window.

“Over here, Mom.”

They pushed and pulled their luggage into the cabin through the window. It was a common practice in Roxche. Sometimes little children climbed in through the windows as well.

Once all their things were inside, Allison joined Lillia in the cabin.

The train whistled at almost exactly the scheduled time and began to move. It left the station, going past the apartment buildings, and headed north.

There was something Lillia never noticed.

“Just in time...” the man muttered to himself, glancing at the ‘Karen East Station’ sign flowing past and at the watch on his wrist.

He was sitting alone in the dining car filled with passengers.

As the car began to shake and rattle again, the man finished his plate and downed his glass of orange juice in one go.

He wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Roxchean cuisine is incredible.”

The man who, across the Lutoni, had been called ‘Prisoner 42’, whispered with a smile. He spoke almost silently in his native tongue of Bezelese.

Then,

“Excuse me, more tea please?” he said to a passing waitress in perfect Roxchean.

### **The Raputoa City Confederation Rail Operations Office, in the Republic of Raputoa.**

The room was the size of a chapel. Inside were chairs and desks lined with radios and telephones. About 10 employees were on duty.

The desks all faced a massive wall 10 meters high and 30 meters long. On the wall was a magnified map of the eastern bank of the Lutoni River—the western edge of Roxche—turned on its side, with the north side on the right. As the region consisted of only a single timezone running in a vertical strip, this office was in charge of the entire area.

The map was labeled with simplified borders, major roads, and important routes. Each set of railway tracks was indicated by a line of lightbulbs, and parallel tracks were indicated by two parallel lines of lights.

Stations were labeled by name and junctions were clearly labeled as well. Even sidings—short strips of rail where slower trains could wait for faster ones to pass ahead of them—were indicated in detail.

Blinking green lights on the lines indicated a moving train. The map was designed to show at a glance where each train was and where each was headed.

Junctions also showed which way the turnouts were set, and stretches with traffic signals showed what color the signals were displaying.

The blinking dot on Karen East Station disappeared and moved to the right—that is, further north.

One of the supervisors, wearing a navy Confederation Rail uniform, pointed at the light. “On schedule. All clear.”

On the desk before him was a timetable crisscrossed by countless lines.

About 10 lights were flashing along the map on the wall, with large gaps between them. This meant that 10 trains were traveling down the tracks.

One of the lights on the same set of tracks was heading for Karen East Station. It followed Lillia and Allison’s train from about 40 kilometers behind.

Treize and the blond woman sat facing one another in the train following Lillia and Allison’s.

They were in the VIP car, in a cabin equal to the size of the bedroom further in the cabin. In the cabin was a large sofa wide enough to comfortably seat four, and an exquisitely-crafted folding table.

The interior was lavishly decorated. The polished wooden moldings, the silk lace curtains, and the pearl lights lent the room the air of a luxury hotel.

Treize and the woman both sat by the window. She sat facing the front of the train, and Treize the back. To Treize's left the clearing sky and the still-bare trees covered with snow passed quickly by.

The woman was wearing a white blouse and a navy skirt. Treize was in brown cotton pants and a black sweater. His ever-present belt pack was left unclasped by the sofa.

They sat in silence as they watched the world pass by outside. Treize was a little bored. The woman was positively tranquil.

The wheels of the train clattered in triple-time, resounding throughout the room.

Outside the cabin.

In the corridor stood two men in black suits. Yzma the man in his twenties, and Ozette the slight man in his forties.

Neither of them were in their jackets, but they still wore ties with their button-up shirts. They both had holsters and small pouches on their belts. They were armed with 9mm automatic handguns and spare magazines.

"Relief's here. You two go have breakfast."

Ed the large man in his forties, and Uno the man in his thirties stepped into the corridor. They were there to take over for Yzma and Ozette and guard the cabin.

Walking down the empty corridor, Yzma whispered to the coworker moving ahead of him, "The prince has been acting like that this whole time. Is this really all right, do you think? Princess Meriel tells me those two barely spoke at all back in Ikstova, too."

"Huh." Ozette grunted. Then—unusually for him—he continued, "If the lady isn't uncomfortable even when they're alone in silence, it probably means they're a good match. That's the most important thing when you're living together."

"So you think they'll really..."

"Hm. Who knows?"

"Aren't you curious? Those two might become the couple of the century."

"In 30 years I might look back on this mission with pride. But that's then. For now, we simply focus on the job."

"Right. Then we'll have to *survive* another 30 years. That means it's time for a hearty meal in case something breaks out."

They opened the coupling door and stepped into the dining car.

As the two men enjoyed a late breakfast—

Forty kilometers to the north, Lillia and Allison were placing their things on the shelves above and hanging up their jackets.

Two armchairs sat facing one another in the first class cabin. At night, the chairs were pushed aside and passengers could unfold beds installed on the walls. The car was heated and very cozy.

"We've got a long trip ahead, Lillia. Should we get some tea and relax?"

"Sure. Can we get some sweets, too?"

Allison and Lillia left the cabin, bringing their wallets in their purses.



They walked down the shaking train and stepped into the dining car. The seats were nearly all taken. Most of the passengers had been onboard since the previous day—many had finished breakfast, enjoying tea with white ceramic teapots on their tables.

The passengers included:

A slight, skinny man in his forties who seemed to be a businessman of some sort. He wore a navy suit and silver-rimmed glasses. His brown hair was cut short. The man was adding generous amounts of sugar to his tea.

At another table was a black-haired man in a black suit, who seemed to be in his twenties. He was reading a newspaper published in Raputoa.

A couple in their thirties, dressed comfortably for travel. The husband had short brown hair and the wife short black hair. In the wicker basket beside the woman slept a baby, who could not be more than two or three months old.

An old man with a shock of white hair, well past his seventies. He looked unsociable and fastidious, but he sat perfectly upright. He was wearing a silk shirt and jacket, both of which looked very expensive. With him was a red-haired woman in her thirties, likely a secretary. She wore a blue business suit with a skirt.

A well-built soldier about 20 years of age, wearing the Confederation Army uniform with a badge of rank indicating he was a private. Perhaps he was on leave or returning home. His blond hair was cropped short.

A man in his thirties, wearing a grey suit. At his feet was a leather medical bag.

A faint-looking man with a delicate build, who wore small glasses with farsighted lenses. His hair was short and curly.

A man in his forties, wearing a checkered red-and-brown outdoor jacket. His long brown hair was tied back. He was reading a pamphlet in his hand entitled ‘A Tourist’s Guide to Roxche’ in Bezelese.

A man in his twenties—likely a university student—with a pair of crutches leaning against his table. He wore a cream-colored sweater and a pair of jeans. A white cast was wrapped around his right leg. In his hands was a formidable physics textbook.

Lillia and Allison briefly greeted the other passengers as they walked down the aisle, finally grabbing the corner table—the only one left. Once the waiter came, they ordered two cups of tea along with scones with jam and whipped cream.

Their order soon arrived. As Lillia and Allison ate, the other passengers finished their tea and left the dining car for their cabins. The injured man did not so much as stagger as he expertly wielded his crutches.

The man once called ‘Prisoner 42’ cast a glance at Allison and Lillia as he left the dining car. They were enjoying their scones, completely oblivious to his frightening gaze.

“Will they be useful? Or not?” he wondered under his breath, disappearing through the door.

And as Lillia and Allison finished their scones and enjoyed the dining car, where no one else was around—

The train carrying Treize and the others arrived at Karen East Station.

Major Travas's subordinates stepped onto the platform with their jackets back on. They did not let their guard down. They checked the foods and materials being loaded onto the train, and one of the men was constantly keeping an eye on the security guard who checked the cars.

The clouds had cleared quite a bit. Major Travas stood alone on the platform, the spring sun spilling onto him.

Silently, he stood before the sign labeled 'Karen East Station' as he stared at the apartment buildings crowded in the distance. The blue sky was reflected on his glasses and narrowed eyes.

Treize went to the car door alone to get some air. He had his belt pack around his waist. The door was open. And outside stood Major Travas. He turned when he noticed Treize. "...Oh!"

Treize, who had only seen the photograph once, realized something—what Lillia had never realized.

Treize was standing precisely where his mother had been 18 years ago, when she pointed a camera at the very subject he was looking at now.

From the relative darkness of the train, the subject was brilliant as he stood in the light.

"Ah. You've noticed," Major Travas remarked. He sounded happy.

Treize nodded and reached for his belt pack. Inside was his favorite handgun and something else—a heavy metallic object.

He drew from the pack a camera.

In the middle of the frame was a small lens, and a pair of dials stuck out from the top like a pair of antennae. On the upper right was the viewfinder. And on the top of the camera was a fan-shaped protrusion equipped with a rotating shutter. It was a rather unusual design for a camera.

The camera was a belated birthday gift, his mother had claimed. But—

*"You have to lend it to me once you come back. So don't lose it, Treize. And do not break it. This is a royal order."*

She had practically forced the camera onto him.

Treize moved to bring the camera to his eye.

But he stopped it over his chest. And he looked the smiling Major Travas in the eye.

"Sorry. No photographs, right?"

"Unfortunately."

Treize put his camera back in his belt pack. Then he stepped down onto the platform and stood next to the major in the sun.

Noting that no one else was around, Treize lowered his voice.

"I heard about what happened 18 years ago from Father. What happened on the train that left this station. He said it was quite the ordeal."

"Has it been that long already? I suppose I'm getting old."

"I also heard Lillia's grandfather was an incredible man."

“Indeed. Without his efforts, the conflict on Lestki Island may not have ended where it did. We would have faced an all-out war. Who knows what would have happened then? He made a very important decision.”

“So you did the same?”

“...I suppose you could say that.”

“Even by throwing away your own happiness? Is that the responsibility of those ‘in the know’?”

“...Your Highness.”

“Yes?”

“No one can make your decisions for you. And you still have time; there’s no rush.”

At that moment, there was a loud whistle.

Major Travas lightly bowed his head and passed by Treize, walking up the steps. At the darkened doorway he turned and gestured. “Your Highness?”

Treize was smiling. Major Travas smiled as well.

Treize jumped over three steps in one bound and leapt into the car.

The folding door closed from the inside. No one stood on the sunlit Karen East Station platform now.

The train started quietly, soon accelerating and leaving the station.

“Your Highness. I’ve put your change of clothes on the bed.”

Inside the room without Treize was the blond woman and the only woman in her service, Ann.

“Thank you. But please, there’s no need to be so formal with me. ‘Miss’ will do as long as we are on this journey,” the blond woman replied in Roxchean, smiling. But Ann remained as cool as ever.

“I understand the Major’s orders, but I ask that I be allowed to maintain formality at times like this, at the very least.”

“All right. I understand, Ann. But please, there’s no need to be so stiff. I’m delighted that everyone speaks to me in casual Roxchean.” The blond woman smiled.

“I understand, Your Highness. ...If I may be so emboldened by your words, this mission is truly an honor. The Gratz family once had the privilege of presenting a gift of ice to the royal family.”

“Oh my! From Grandmother’s father’s generation, then?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Times have changed, and our family took the way of the military starting in my grandfather’s generation. My grandfather, my father, my mother, and myself as well.”

“That’s very noble of you. We of the royal family are always grateful for the loyalty of our soldiers. I thank you for your devotion to king and country, in my father’s stead.”

“You honor me, Your Highness. ...After this mission, I plan to go on leave, back to the West. I will report to my father in the Cemetery of Heroes that I had the privilege of acting as your guard, Your Highness.”

“I see. I’m very sorry to that.”

“Please don’t let it concern you, Your Highness. It was a very long time ago, when I was still young. It feels as though I’ve simply been chasing his footsteps all this time. And now I am here, carrying out the most honorable of missions. ‘True to your mission to the very end’, my father used to say. I have never so keenly felt these words weighing on my shoulders as I do now.”

“Your father must have been an admirable man,” said the blond woman, “And the major has a very admirable subordinate in his command.”

\* \* \*

The train carrying Lillia and Allison was traveling under the blue sky.

All around them were forests devoid of green, and fields that had yet to be worked. The green train cut across the barely-green land.

Lillia lounged in her chair, blankly gazing out the window to her right.

Allison glanced through a thick pile of documents in a folder, on occasion marking things out with a fountain pen.

It was a little before noon.

There was a short chime, and the conductor made an announcement over the speakers. The train was soon to reach Norn Station, and the dining car had begun to serve lunch, he said.

“Lunch, Lillia?”

“Mm... I’m not really hungry yet. Before that—”

She yawned. The warmth of the cabin and the gentle shaking of the car was putting her to sleep.

“I’m getting sleepy. Can we go after lunchtime, since there won’t be as many people around?”

“Sure. I’m not that hungry right now, either.”

“Wake me up then.”

“All right, sweetheart.”

Lillia lowered her head, closing her eyes—

The train shook violently.

It felt like someone had hit the brakes. Not only that, the train was even shaking from side to side.

“Whoa! Wh-what? An earthquake?” Lillia cried, looking up. The shaking stopped in an instant. Then—

“Ack!”

The train shook again. Allison closed her folder and placed it on the table.

“That’s strange.”

The train was still moving. But the shaking continued at two- or three-second intervals. And eventually, the train seemed to brake to a slow.

“Whoa...”

Allison held down her folder before it fell off the table. Lillia, completely awake, tightly gripped her armrests.

“Are we stalling? Wait, this isn’t an aeroplane.”

With dull creaks the train quickly slowed and finally came to a rocky stop in the middle of the woods.

Silence came over the cabin.

“Was it a signal error? That first round of shaking bugs me, though,” Allison wondered.

“This had better not be a breakdown!” Lillia hissed, her imagination running wild.

The Raputoa City Confederation Rail Operations Office.

The light that was soon due at Norn Station stopped. The middle-aged supervisor quickly took notice and ordered his subordinates to take care of the signals and establish communications with the train.

The conductor responded to the transmission and reported that the engineer reported engine trouble and strange vibrations, which led him to stop the train.

The supervisor ordered him to head for Norn Station—which had an available siding—if possible. The conductor said he would.

Even as the supervisor waited nervously, the following train was approaching. Naturally at a certain point a signal would go out and prevent the trains from crashing, but each time the light moved one more point the supervisor’s lip twitched.

Eventually, they received word from the stopped train. The engineer managed to get the locomotive going, said the conductor, and they would probably make it to Norn Station. One light moved forward. Sighs of relief flooded the office.

“We’re finally moving.”

“But I don’t think we’ll make it past the next station.”

Lillia and Allison were chatting in their cabin. After several minutes stopped on the tracks, the train had finally begin to move and the scenery finally changed.

“Then what?”

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll have to take the next train.”

Slowly, the train continued. Eventually they saw several houses and narrow streets outside. Soon, the train made its way into a small station in a small town surrounded by small fields.

The tracks split into two, one on either side of the platform. The train moved into the right set of tracks and stopped with the platform to its left.

It was just before noon. The train was about 15 minutes behind schedule.

The man once called ‘Prisoner 42’ glanced at the station sign and his wristwatch.

“Right on schedule. Perfect!”

He applauded.

### **Chapter 3: And so They Met**

On that clear spring day, a small commotion was unfolding on the platform of Norn Station.

There was no roof over the platform. The sun shone from the top of the sky as the businessman, the middle-aged woman who boarded at Karen East, the soldier, and other passengers crowded around the conductor and the station employees.

“Then when will you get the train moving?” asked a suit-clad man in his thirties.

“Yeah!”

“When?”

“You have to do something soon.”

The other passengers complained as well. The conductor, whose name tag identified him as ‘Bettner’, desperately explained the situation.

“I’m afraid the engine’s died on us. We only just managed to get the train to the station. It seems like there’s a problem with the fueling system or the engine itself, which isn’t an easy fix. I’m terribly sorry to say that this train will be stopping here.”

The passengers hounded him for answers.

Lillia watched it all from the platform.

“I can’t believe we actually have engine trouble. ...Come to think of it, something like this happened at the end of last year, huh. Although that ended up turning into an accident.”

Allison shrugged. “Even I can’t do a thing about this one.”

They were sitting side-by-side on a bench on the platform.

Most of the passengers had come out to the platform to join the angry mob, or to watch. The commotion happened to be taking place in front of the second class car, so even people like the couple in their thirties and the man with the broken leg watched through the window.

“What do you think’s going to happen?” the man asked the couple.

“Hm...who knows?” the husband said brusquely.

“What are you going to do now?”

Bettner continued to reiterate that there was nothing he could do at this point. The passengers angrily asked him why the crew would leave them at such a remote station. The conversation went nowhere. Then—

“Can’t we just take the next train?”

Speaking up was a suit-clad man in his late twenties. All eyes turned to him. The man shrank for a moment, clearly not expecting the attention, but quickly cleared his throat. “Well, er...isn’t there another train headed north? I remember checking the timetables and wondering if I should take this train or the next one. As I recall, there’s only a half-hour difference between the trains. Couldn’t we simply take the next train when it comes?”

Everyone seemed to agree with the suggestion, but Bettner shook his head.

“Naturally, that was the first thing I’d considered. But—”

“But?”

“I’m afraid the next train’s been booked completely...”

“Every seat? But it’s not even the holidays. Even second class?” asked the man who had made the suggestion.

“I’m afraid so. The entire train was booked the moment reservations were opened. Even second class.”

“I don’t believe this...this train has less than 20 passengers. And somehow the next one is full?”

“I believe it might be a group reservation. So they won’t be able to accommodate any more passengers. We can’t exactly have first class passengers standing in the halls all the way to Lor.”

Everyone was disheartened.

“Ugh! Why now?” the middle-aged woman complained, but no one answered her.

“Hey, I’ve got it! Why don’t we have the next train tow our cars behind it? Problem solved!” the soldier proposed confidently.

All eyes were on Bettner again. He explained that the idea went against regulations, that even if they received permission none of the stations ahead of them had enough platforms to accommodate a train of such length, and that even if the platforms were long enough there would be such a strain on the locomotive that the train would move at a crawl.

Then,

“All trains after that are local trains; none of them are bound for Lor. Everyone will have to stay the night here today, so I’d like to ask passengers to remain in the cars until a replacement locomotive arrives.”

Naturally, the passengers asked how long that would take.

“At this point, we have no way of knowing. In the worst-case scenario we’ll have to use the next train that departs from Elitèsa tonight.”

Bettner was honest almost to the point of idiocy.

The passengers were furious. For some time they nodded at one another’s plights and cursed the railroad company, loudly proclaiming that they would travel by bus or aeroplane next time.

Meanwhile, Lillia and Allison remained the very picture of calm.

“This is getting crazy.”

“One night’s delay isn’t so bad—we’re not in any rush, anyway.”

“I guess. ...Say, aren’t there any Air Force bases around here, Mom? We could borrow a plane and take off...”

“We can’t do that, honey. There are a few bases in the area, but I don’t have any excuse to borrow an aeroplane.”

At that moment, the railway crossing bell at the end of the platform began to chime.

The stationmaster blew his whistle.

“The next train is arriving. Please step back, everyone.”

Far down the tracks in the distance shone a set of headlights. The people standing on the left side of the platform watched in disgust as they stepped back.

“Hell. Who rents an entire train? I’m going to get a good look at their faces,” the soldier said, speaking for all the passengers.

With a whistle, the train slid into the station.

Naturally, no one at the station would be boarding this train. Many sets of eyes glared daggers at the new arrival. And—

“What?”

“Hm?”

“What?”

“No way!”

“Ah!”

“This is outrageous!”

The passengers were shocked, appalled, and furious.

“Huh? ... Wait, what is this?”

Lillia also rose to her feet, joining the other passengers in their incredulity. Allison alone reacted differently.

“Shucks. So this was the one, huh,” she mumbled to herself, putting her hand on her forehead.

The train was empty.

The yellow locomotive passed by them, and the VIP car—with curtains drawn over the windows—passed as well.

Then followed the first class and second class sleeper cars, then the dining car and the second class car, but no one was onboard. There wasn’t a single passenger in sight. The station building behind the train was clearly visible beyond the windows.

“There’s no one here!”

“Are you playing games with us?!”

“This is fraud!”

Understandably, the people on the platform were outraged. Even Bettner was flabbergasted at the sight of the empty train rolling into the station.

“Impossible...they clearly said it was full...”

“This is ridiculous!” Lillia burst out, finally reaching her limit. She stomped over to the hapless conductor.

“Mr. Conductor! Since there’s no one on that train, you should just let us take it!”

“That’s right!”

“Show him who’s boss, young lady!”

“Yeah!”

As a chorus of agreement filled the platform, the train came to a full stop.

“L-let me inquire about the situation first. Please wait a moment and refrain from entering the train. Please,” Bettner said nervously, turning his back on the angry passengers and taking off toward the first car.

“Let’s follow him,” someone suggested.

The other passengers agreed. Naturally, Lillia followed as well. But she stopped partway and turned. She saw Allison standing by the bench, looking quite displeased. Lillia tilted her head.

“Mom?”

“Ah. I’m coming, honey.”



Bettner and about 20 passengers has walked down the platform to the VIP car behind the locomotive, when the back door of the VIP car opened and the conductor stepped outside. He was a tall man in his forties, also wearing a uniform.

“Ah! Excuse me, Mr. Cohen!”

The tall conductor called Cohen turned at Bettner’s voice.

“Yes? ...Hm?”

He flinched when he spotted the angry passengers at Bettner’s heels. Lillia was among the passengers. Allison was a little ways away, catching up to the group.

Cohen was facing his colleague and the passengers alone. The passengers allowed Bettner to speak first.

“What’s going on here, Mr. Cohen?”

“Is something the matter?”

“Wasn’t this train supposed to be booked solid?”

“Well, yes.”

“But there’s no one onboard.”

“Oh. Well...”

Just as Cohen began,

“We bought all the tickets.”

Another man spoke from behind him. Lillia and the passengers all turned to the VIP car door, where the voice had come from.

A suit-clad man stepped onto the platform.

Most people had no idea who he was.

“What?”

Lillia, however, was picking up her jaw off the floor.

“How?”

Emerging from the car was a familiar face, though he was not in uniform this time.

The man was in his mid-thirties and had black hair and glasses. There was a calm, scholarly air to him. Major Travas, Allison’s boyfriend and a soldier working at the Sou Be-II embassy in the Capital District.

Lillia was standing behind the tall soldier, so she was hidden from Travas’s view. Allison had stopped approaching and looked away, which kept her away from his sights as well. Major Travas explained the situation to the conductors in polite Roxchean.

“My colleagues and I bought all the tickets to this train. That is why the train is empty but booked solid.”

“Oh? And why is that?” asked Bettner.

“We’re currently transporting some important cargo. We cannot disclose any more information,” Major Travas said emphatically.

“I don’t know the details myself,” Cohen added before anyone could ask. Major Travas looked apologetically at the passengers.

“We’ve just heard from the conductor about your train, but I’m afraid we cannot let anyone board.”

To no one’s shock, the passengers were upset.

Ann watched the confusion through a scope.

“If you clearly spot a firearm, pull the trigger. No hesitation,” said the man behind her.

They were at the very end of the train. The sliding door of the freight car was slightly open, with the barrel of her rifle sticking out discreetly. Because most people on the platform were crowded around the front, no one noticed the sniper.

Just behind Ann was Ozette, watching the platform through a pair of binoculars. He had a folded assault rifle slung over his shoulder.

Ann breathed slowly. The people were close enough that she could see their faces through the scope.

“I know you’ve never shot a person before, but don’t worry too much. Just pull the trigger like you always do. You’ve never missed a shot in training. Imagine the target is someone you hate and blow their head off,” Ozette said plainly. It was hard to tell if he was trying to help her relax, or keep her on her toes.

Ann saw Major Travas in the distance, explaining things to the crowd while refusing to budge. Because the two conductors and the stationmaster stood between them, it did not seem like a fight would break out.

A voice came over the radio on Ozette’s belt. <This is Yzma from the dining car. Quick look says no one on the platform is armed.>

Ozette pressed the talk button on the microphone he wore on his neck. <Roger that. Keep an eye out, and make sure the doors are securely locked. And keep the windows shut.>

<Right. But just to warn you, they could break the locks easily if they wanted to.>

<I know that. Over.>

“What is happening? I hope there aren’t any problems out there,” the blond woman said, concerned.

She was sitting on a sofa, and so was Treize. Uno and Ed were by the window, holding 9mm automatic handguns with their fingers on the safety. There were wireless earpieces in their ears.

<—they could break the locks easily if they wanted to.>

<I know that. Over.>

Uno stuck close to the window and peered out through the curtains.

“How are things?” Treize asked in Roxchean. Uno replied in Roxchean as well.

“Not good. The passengers from the other train are demanding to board this one. It’s not going to be easy convincing them. The leader’s going to emphasize that we bought all the tickets and that they can’t board, but if the passengers decide to charge inside anyway we won’t be able to stop them.”

“Then we’re going to let them on?” asked Treize.

“Maybe. If we let them in on the condition that they use only the cars behind the dining car, we’ll be able to keep the lady secure. The leader knows that well.”

Treize went quiet, nodding. The woman’s emerald-green eyes stared into his face, but he did not notice.

A moment later, they received another transmission.

The two men asked the other party to wait, then turned to the woman.

“Miss. We have a report from the leader.”

“Yes?”

““Though this is not the perfect solution, I will choose the best solution available and allow the passengers to board”, he says. He would also like to apologize.”

“I understand. I cannot impose any further on the people of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Please inform him that I have faith in his judgement.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The men returned to their communications. Treize looked at the woman sitting across from him. The hint of concern in her face seemed to have disappeared.

He almost felt himself shrinking in the face of her elegant smile.

“I’m all right,” she said, “The leader and the team are here. And so are you.”

“...Oh, er...”

Treize tried to say something, but he stopped partway and ended up going silent.

On the platform, the passengers cheered.

The midday sun shone brightly upon the platform.

“Everyone! They’ll let us board the cars behind the dining car! And they’re giving us full refunds for the tickets! We’re riding for free!” someone announced.

The passengers outside cheered. Lillia, who had hidden herself back in the car, rushed to her mother as soon as the latter came after her.

“What’s going on, Mom? What’s he doing here?”

“Well, you see...we were supposed to meet after he was done with work. But I can’t believe he was on the train right after ours...” Allison said, disconcerted.

“Give me the details later,” Lillia demanded, then smiled. “But I’m glad they’re letting us on.”

Once Ann and Ozette smuggled back their sniper rifle and assault rifle in a sack, the doors of the cars behind the dining car were opened and passengers were allowed to board.

Although the passengers would be given a free ride, there were some restrictions.

Those who were originally in the second class seats would use the second class seats on this train as well. Everyone who used a sleeper car would go to the second class sleeper cars. However, there was still room left over even if everyone boarded, so those from the VIP car and the first class car (like Lillia and Allison) were allowed to share 4-passenger cabins between only two people.

The dining car would be open, but the first class and VIP cars beyond were strictly off-limits. There would be a guard stationed at the door at all times, and any intruders would be subdued with force.

The suit-clad man in his twenties and the soldier, who had struck up a friendship during the commotion, glanced at the original occupants of the train.

“Who d’you think they might be?”

“Private security guards, maybe. Or the mafia. Either way, I hate their guts.”

“Agreed.”

“And I sure as hell don’t want to get involved in their business.”

“Agreed.”

They muttered to each other as they helped the other passengers carry their luggage over.

The man with the broken leg thanked the two of them for bringing over his things, and went to the second class sleeper car. A man in his thirties who was carrying over a medical bag and a large suitcase put down everything he had when he saw the scene.

“Here. Let me help.” He went over and helped the younger man climb aboard.

“Thank you. I’m really grateful.”

“A fracture? A broken leg can be a pain.”

“Yes. It still hurts a little. Are you a physician by any chance?”

“Pediatrician, actually.”

The long-haired man in his forties, who had been walking in confusion on the platform for some time, came over to the train.

“Switch? Here? Is it okay? I am not mistaken?” he asked Bettner in broken Roxchean.

The stoic old man and his secretary quietly went from the VIP car to the second class sleeper car. They were both carrying heavy-looking suitcases.

As for the couple, the husband brought their luggage and the wife gently carried the basket with their baby as they headed for the second class sleeper car.

“Would you like a hand?” asked a middle-aged woman, smiling as she stroked the face of the sleeping baby.

Lillia and Allison took their things and crossed the platform. They opened the door to an empty cabin and tossed their luggage inside.

Bettner made sure everyone was aboard, then took off his hat and nodded to Cohen.

Cohen returned the nod and blew his whistle.

The locomotive roared back to life, black smoke spewing. The energy ran down the train and slowly propelled the cars forward.

About an hour past noon, the long-distance train headed north departed Norn Station half an hour late.

Bettner watched as the freight car at the end of the train passed him by. The red taillight grew smaller and smaller. And once the light disappeared completely in the distance, where the tracks ran into the horizon—

“Phew. I’ve had enough of this.”

He scratched his head.

\* \* \*

Once the train had started again, the blond woman sat back in her sofa.

“I’m glad there wasn’t any trouble,” she said, almost naively.

Treize, sitting opposite her, was completely silent, not knowing what to say.

Major Travas was outside in the corridor.

“Do not let your guard down even for an instant. No one is permitted past the dining car. Keep an eye out on the roof as well. Ann and I will go patrol the train now. Ann, bring the 9mm. Yzma, you’re on lunch break. Everyone else, resume guard duty.”

He was giving his subordinates orders, his expression grave.

Lillia was sitting in a reddish-brown moquette seat in a second class sleeper cabin.

“Our room’s smaller now, but that’s besides the point. I want an explanation, Mom,” she demanded.

Allison sat across from her daughter.

“I was actually going to tell you once we got there, but I suppose there’s nothing I can do now.” She surrendered.

And—

The man once called ‘Prisoner 42’ sat alone.

“Perfect. Everything is going perfectly.”

He was chuckling, praising himself.

“It’s so perfect it’s almost boring,” he muttered.

\* \* \*

“Every passenger?”

“Yes. They will have to show their faces if they want to get their tickets checked.”

As soon as the train reached a steady pace, Major Travas and Ann went to Cohen in the dining car and got to work.

“We’d like to get a good look at every face on this train. We need to go down the cars as soon as we can,” Major Travas said, looking almost threatening.

Cohen complied reluctantly and allowed Major Travas and Ann to accompany him. Behind the dining car were two second class sleeper cars, two second class cars, and two freight cars.

“Then let’s be off. But I do not want any more trouble on this trip.”

They, beginning with the second class sleeper cars.

“This is the conductor. Your tickets, please.”

Once the conductor asked for the ticket, the passenger was bound to open the door without hesitation.

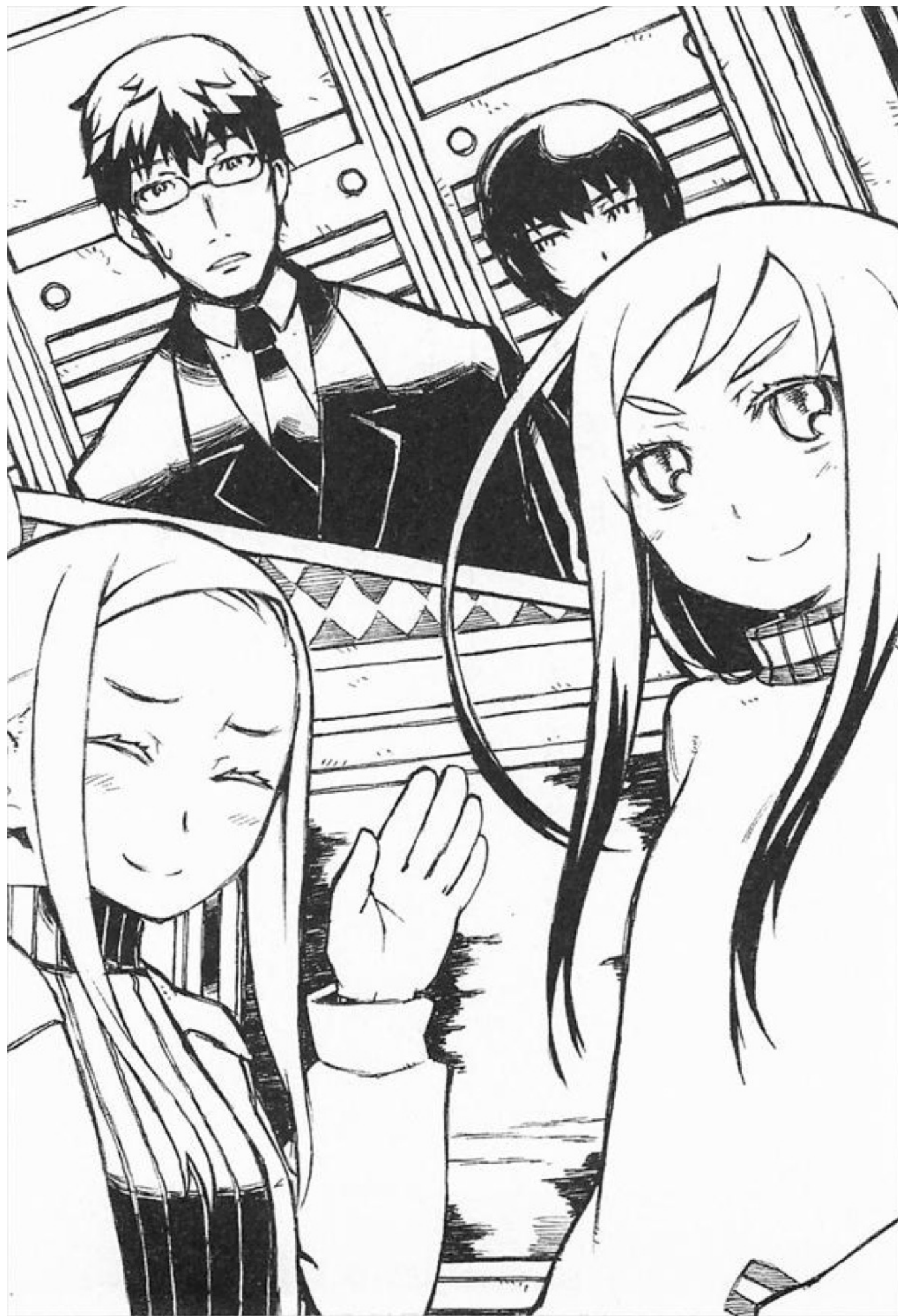
Standing behind Cohen, Major Travas found himself glared at by the stoic man in the first cabin, thanked by the couple in the second cabin, and given a funny look by the injured man in the third cabin. Then,

“Hey there.”

“It’s been a while. Could I ask a few questions?”

He was greeted by Allison and Lillia in the fourth cabin.

Major Travas was stunned into silence.



“Leader?” Ann asked, surprised by his reaction. Major Travas came to his senses and greeted Allison and Lillia.

“Er, Mr. Leader. Do you know these passengers?” asked Cohen.

“Yes. This here is a friend of mine from work. And her daughter. What a coincidence, running into you two here.”

Lillia said nothing. Allison grinned. “Sure is a surprise,” she replied, “And it’s nice to see you again, Miss. We met once before—last summer, right?”

Before Ann could even wonder if she should reply, Allison continued.

“I’m really sorry to say, but I just can’t seem to remember your name right now.”

Ann quickly understood Allison’s intent and smiled.

“It’s Ann. I only use my first name for work purposes.”

“Ah! Yes. It’s been a while, Ann. This here is my daughter Lillia. She’s on spring break right now so we’re off on a trip together.”

Lillia greeted Ann and lightly nodded. Ann returned the greeting.

Major Travas waited for Cohen to finish checking the tickets, then addressed Allison and Lillia.

“I’m afraid I can’t talk yet—I’m still on duty. I’ll come by later when I have time to answer your questions.”

Then Travas, Ann, and Cohen left the cabin.

The door closed.

“So where was I?”

“You said you were going to go on a date with Major Travas in Lor. I understand that much very well.”

“And, well, I used all the means at my disposal to make this trip a reality.”

“So your motives were purely selfish.”

“You caught me! Yes. I’m sorry, honey.”

“I don’t really mind. Actually, I don’t mind at all. I want you to enjoy your life. Heh. What are the chances? Us running into the guy on duty on the train right after ours... I don’t know if we’re lucky or unlucky.”

“It’s more unlucky, I’d say.”

“Why?”

“From the looks of things, he’s definitely on security detail for something—or someone. And if the conductor’s calling him ‘leader’ and not by name...”

“He’s hiding his identity. I’m so glad I didn’t end up blurting it out...”

“Yeah. Don’t use his name, okay? And on that note, we’re better off not interacting with him too much on the train.”

“Is he on a dangerous mission, do you think?”

“I don’t know that much. And I have no way of knowing. But it’s clear that we’re better off being in the dark. We should just take it easy until we reach Lor tomorrow. Everything will be fine.”

“Okay. I don’t want to get caught up in another crazy mess. Last year was more than enough.”

“Yeah.”

“...I’m thirsty. I think I’ll get some tea from the dining car—do you want me to pick up something for you, Mom?”

“I’m all right, honey. You can have your tea in the dining car if you want, but make sure you don’t go any further.”

“I know. I’ll stay the heck away from the front of the train.”

Just as Lillia left her cabin, Treize broke the silence in the VIP cabin.

“...Er...h-how about some tea? I suppose we could brew some here, but the stove here isn’t great, is it. I’ll go get some from the dining car instead!”

He wanted to get away from the cabin.

The blond woman agreed with a smile. Treize practically escaped into the corridor.

“I can bring the tea. Please, enjoy yourselves,” Yzma offered, but Treize declined and headed for the dining car.

Lillia stepped into the dining car. She passed through the corridor that forked into the kitchen and opened another door, which led into a room furnished with tables covered in white tablecloths.

“Huh? This is weird.”

It was the middle of the day, but no one was around.

The waiter, a man in his mid-twenties, was lounging around the servers’ table. He looked up.

“It’s the suits, Miss. They bought pre-packed lunches at Norn Station and now they’re handing them out to the passengers, starting from the back of the train.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Hope they’re not poisoned or anything.”

Lillia laughed awkwardly, unsure if the waiter was joking or not. According to him, the cooks and the other waiters had gone out to serve tea and distribute hand towels.

“The train carries ingredients based on the number of passengers it can carry at full load. So we’re definitely capable of serving the passengers. Wonder why the suits’re so keen on keeping them out of the dining car. Although I can’t complain, myself. I’ve been watching since last night—and dunno if they’re guarding someone or transporting something, but these people are some shady folks. You’d better stay away from them,” he whispered, and started on Lillia’s tea.

He put tea leaves into a white ceramic teapot big enough for three or four cups, then slowly poured in water that had been heated on an electric stove by the counter.

Lillia paid for the tea with change, then looked at the door. She saw a large silhouette beyond the glass.

“I’m not touching that place with a 10-foot pole,” she said, turning back to the waiter.

The door opened loudly.

Lillia flinched. And, a little upset at the noise, she turned again.

And the moment she saw the newcomer—

“AH!”



She cried out loud enough to startle the waiter. Hot water sloshed out of the pot.

As Ed stood rooted in front of the door—

“It’s all right. I’m just going to get some tea,” Treize had said, opening the door and entering the dining car.

“AH!”

Treize was more startled by the voice than the waiter was. He looked at the counter.

“WHOA!”

And he cried out, loud enough to startle Ed.

When Major Travas returned to the dining car with Ann and Cohen in tow, he witnessed an outrageous scene.

“Why? How? What are you doing here? I want an explanation! Do you hear me? Say something!”

His own daughter was interrogating Prince Treize of Ikstova, grabbing him by the collar.

Lillia had crossed her hands and was holding Treize’s shirt tight enough for it to tear. His face grew pale.

Ed and the waiter stared blankly.

Major Travas stared incredulously.

“Shall I stop her?” asked Ann.

Major Travas nodded. “I retract my earlier orders. Take them to first class before any other passengers come to the dining car,” he said.

Even after escaping to the privacy of the first class car, Lillia’s anger did not abate. In the narrow corridor she stood with her back to the window, glaring daggers at the babbling Treize.

“Explain! Now!”

“Hold on... I...I was just getting tea...” Treize stuttered in confusion.

“Tea’s over there.” Lillia pointed at Major Travas, who stood baffled in the corridor. He was holding the pot of tea that Lillia had ordered.

Major Travas went up to Lillia. “Please calm down, Lillianne.”

“Hm.”

Like a hunter distracted by another prey, Lillia turned to the smiling major and glared. His smile did not falter.

“I will explain the situation. Would that satisfy you?”

“I suppose,” Lillia said with a sigh. Then she turned back to Treize.

Treize could only smile awkwardly. Ann took the moment to whisper to Major Travas. “What will you do, sir?”

Major Travas replied under his breath, “We’ll tell her that we’re transporting a large quantity of gold jewelry from Iks. For our purposes, His Highness will be a guide. We say nothing about the lady.”

“Understood. Situation 3.”

They quietly worked out a story.

“Actually—” Major Travas began to spin a lie he had prepared earlier. But,

“Oh my! Has something happened? Is everything all right, Treize? And who might this be?”

A blond woman with a gentle countenance stepped into the corridor.

“I tried to stop her...” Yzma said apologetically from behind her.

“Who’s this?” Lillia wondered, tilting her head.

“Er...she’s... I...well...” Treize stammered, panicking.

Major Travas sighed with the teapot still in hand.

Just as things became complicated in the first class sleeper car, the man once called ‘Prisoner 42’ grinned.

“Delicious. This is positively scrumptious.”

In the pre-packed lunch the men had handed out were sandwiches with cheese and chicken cooked to perfection, garnished with mayonnaise and mustard.

“Roxche is a wonderful place. It really is.”

He was savoring his meal.

Allison stared at the two pre-packed lunches in her cabin.

“She’s late...”

She mumbled to herself.

“This is too long to be just a tea break. ...They couldn’t have run into one another there, could they?”

Allison’s prediction was right on the mark.

## **Chapter 4: Hilda and Lillia**

In the luxurious cabin in the VIP car were the blond woman, Treize, and a newcomer—Lillia.

The blond woman sat by the window, facing forward like before. Lillia sat across from her. Treize sat on the same sofa as Lillia, albeit as far away as he possibly could.

On the folding table between them was a teapot and three cups.

Major Travas and Ann checked the tea for poison and left the room. Yzma alone remained, standing straight before the door with his hands behind his back. His eyes were pointed at the ceiling, but he was focusing his vision below, where the three passengers were.

“Why don’t we have some tea before it gets cold?” the blond woman said in Roxchean.

“Sure. Here, let me—”

“It’s all right. Allow me.”

Lillia reached over to pour the tea, but the woman stopped her and did it herself. She moved with grace, not faltering in spite of the shaking of the car. Lillia was speechless.

Once she was finished, the woman put down the teapot without making a sound.

“Enjoy.”

“Thank you very much.” Lillia bowed lightly. She waited for the woman to pick up her cup, then took her own.

They brought the cups to their mouths in unison.

“It’s marvelous.”

“It’s great.”

They gave their opinions simultaneously, and exchanged smiles.

After they put down their cups,

“It’s nice to meet you. My name’s Lillia—Lillianne Schultz.” Lillia introduced herself first.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lillia. I am Hilda. I’m from the Kingdom of Iltoa in the West.”

The blond woman introduced herself by a fake name and background that had been invented for her in advance, just in case.

“You have a wonderful name, Lillianne. Did you know? That name once belonged to a queen who ruled my homeland of Iltoa. She was strong, beautiful, and was a beloved ruler. It suits you.”

“Thank you.”

The girls were completely at ease, but Treize was far from relaxed. He had not taken even a single sip of his tea, though the cup was still in his hand. Yzma watched as he masked his annoyance behind a blank facade.

“Treize.” Hilda turned with a smile.

“Oh! Yes?” Treize replied, his tea sloshing onto his hand. He tried to ignore the pain and looked up. “Ahem. Let me introduce you. Lillia here is my childhood friend. My parents and hers are old friends. Lillia lives in the Capital District, but she’s visited Ikstova many times over breaks. Oh, and Lillia’s mother is a soldier, but she knows the leader—Major Travas—through

work. Coincidentally, I've met the major before, as well. What a coincidence, running into Lillia here."

Treize's explanation was haphazard at best. He even ended up using the word 'coincidence' twice.

"Oh my. I see. So you know that Treize is heir to the inn in northern Ikstova, Lillia?"

"She does! She knows very well," Treize said firmly. Hilda had asked the question to confirm that Lillia did not know Treize's true identity, but Lillia did not know that.

"Treize and I have been friends for years. We're pretty close. We used to play together all the time in Iks," said Lillia.

"I suppose I should introduce my family as well," Hilda said, "My father is a gold merchant in Iltoa. Although I'm sad to say that I cannot divulge any more details."

"Er...is this supposed to be a secret—" Lillia began, worried, but Hilda cut her off.

"It's all right. I visited Iks to examine and bring back local jewelry in my father's stead. I plan to pass through Lor and return to Iltoa by ship."

"Oh. Now I see there's so much security here."

"Yes. My father went to great lengths to ask Major Travas for help through an acquaintance. He couldn't leave my security in the hands of anyone less."

"So that's why you have people from the embassy protecting you."

"Yes. My father can be quite protective. Afterwards, Major Travas introduced Treize to me. He's an excellent guide, and he's even around my own age, so I asked him to come with me to Lor. I'm very grateful for his company."

"I see. I understand now," Lillia said apologetically. "But...and I know it's a little late to be saying this, but is it really all right for me to be here just because I know the major?"

Hilda beamed. "Absolutely! I was always so busy helping my father that I rarely ever attended school. I have very few friends of my own age. I'm so pleased to have the chance to speak with you, Lillia. The train ride will feel a lot shorter with another friend by my side."

"That's good to hear." Lillia smiled, and took a sip of tea. Hilda did as well. They finished their cups almost in unison.

"How about another cup?"

"Sure."

Hilda and Lillia turned to Treize simultaneously.

Treize's hesitant sips quickly turned into chugging as he drained his cup in one go.

"Right! I'll be right back. And since Lillia's the one who bought this tea, I'll go buy some myself this time."

And so, Prince Treize of Ikstova left for an errand.

Yzma cast him a lukewarm glance as he left the cabin.

In the corridor, Treize ran into Ozette, who asked him how the others were getting along.

"They're getting along well, yes."

Just past the coupling door, Treize ran into Major Travas and Allison, who had come to find her daughter.

"They're getting along very well, yes," he said to Allison, and stepped into the dining car with the teapot in his hands.

“Things are getting messy,” Allison commented.

“Yeah.”

Allison and Major Travas were speaking alone in the coupling. There was no one else around.

“Is this really all right?” Allison asked, with more than one meaning behind her question.

“Not exactly, but what can we do now? Besides...”

“Yes?”

“...To be honest, the lady is a very lonely person. I’d like for Lillia to give her some company, at least while we’re on the train,” Major Travas said gravely.

Allison stifled a laugh. “You’re too nice, you know that? Although that’s what’s so great about you,” she said, opening the door to the dining car. Treize emerged with a full teapot in hand, surprised that the door had opened seemingly automatically.

“Thank you,” Treize said, and walked past them.

“It was the perfect chance, too,” Allison mumbled as she closed the door behind Treize.

“Could I leave her to you until nighttime?”

“It’s up to the lady, but I think so,” Travas replied.

“It won’t interfere with security?”

“If her presence in the VIP car can be considered an interference, our security’s as good as a failure.”

“Then I’m counting on you. See you later.”

Allison gave his shoulders a pat and disappeared into the dining car.

Major Travas watched the door close, then went in the opposite direction. Then he asked Uno and Ann—who were in the corridor so as not to disturb Hilda—to resume their watch.

“Is your daughter all right? She’s been in there for quite a while,” the waiter asked Allison from the counter.

Allison drew a Confederation Air Force ID from her pocket—secured with a lanyard—and flashed it at the waiter.

“It’s fine. Although I can’t say why. And this ID is a secret too, all right?”

“Oh. Right.” The waiter nodded, clearly not wanting to get involved.

“Could I have some tea, too?” Allison asked, placing a coin on the counter.

Yzma opened the door for Treize when he reached the cabin. Treize stepped inside.

“I know, right? He’s not bad, but he’s, you know, kinda soft.”

“Oh, yes. I understand what you mean.”

Lillia and Hilda were chattering about him.

“Are you talking about me?” Treize asked, already aware of the answer. The girls turned.

“Uh huh.” “Yes.”

They replied in unison, though in different registers. Then they exchanged glances and giggled.

Treize chuckled along without thinking and expertly poured three cups of tea.

“I’m stepping outside, Miss. Ask for me if you need any assistance—I’ll be in the corridor. We’ll prepare your lunches soon. If you’ll excuse me,” Yzma said, leaving the cabin.

Three people were left in the VIP cabin.

“That’s right. Everything in Iks is scrumptious, but the cheese is to die for. You couldn’t find cheese that good even in the Capital District. I’ve always thought, if I lived in Iks, I’d gain so much weight!”

“I ate cheese every day during my stay in Iks, as well. My favorite was the dish where the large wheel of cheese is cut in half and melted over charcoal to spread over vegetables. I also loved the pasta with the bowl made of cheese.”

“I know, right? With the pasta you have to take your time and mix up the noodles slowly. Then you top it off with powdered cheese. It’s really good!”

“Yes. I’d like to have them made at home once I return to Iltoa. Though the pasta might not be a challenge, I’m not certain we could procure the same kind of cheese.”

“You can have it sent by mail. Just place an order with a store in Kunst, and they’ll send you an entire wheel. My mom and I thought about ordering one, but the wheels are so big we gave up on it. But you can share the cheese with your whole family, right?”

“That would be wonderful. But would they ship to Sou Be-Il, do you think?”

“Oh...I’m not sure. Why not ask Treize and start a cheese business?”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I’m sure people in Iltoa and Bezel will both love Ikstovan cheese and cuisine.”

“Looks like you’ve got another job on your plate, Treize. —Hilda, did you try the tiny fried fish served with vinegar? It’s got loads of diced onions—”

The amount of conversation in the cabin had increased exponentially with Lillia’s presence.

Naturally, Lillia and Hilda were the only ones talking. All Treize did was answer their occasional questions.

“Yes.”

“Yes, we do sell those.”

“Summer, three years ago.”

“Diamonds.”

“Not yet.”

“I don’t think that’s feasible.”

“I’m not sure...”

“They use black vinegar.”

“Yes.”

“About 80 centimeters.”

“No.”

That was the extent of his involvement.

Lillia and Hilda, having struck up a friendship, continued to chat endlessly.

The topic of the conversation changed easily and frequently. From food to Roxchean television, to films, music, clothes, jewelry, hats, napping, the weather, sports, and—for some reason—ghost stories.

Hilda was especially captivated by stories about student life at the Capital District. Lillia enthusiastically chattered about school.

Treize, cowed by the sheer amount of discussion taking place, grumbled under his breath.

“Women...”

Lillia glared. “Did you say something, Treize?”

“No, nothing...”

The moment Treize shook his head, lunch was served to the two participants in the conversation and the lone bystander.

Ann knocked on the door and entered when she received permission. In her hands were four pre-packed lunches from Norn Station. Yzma followed behind her with tea.

Once Ann and Yzma were gone again, the three partook in a slightly late lunch.

Lillia and Hilda enjoyed their meal, making comments about the same sandwiches Prisoner 42 so praised.

Treize quietly—and at about double the speed—ate two portions.

Even after lunch, Lillia and Hilda’s chatter knew no end. Treize slowly took sips of tea as he watched the girls’ smiles and the passing scenery.

After his final cup of tea,

“Excuse me. Let me take the cups,” Treize said, putting the empty cups and teapot onto a tray. He folded the table as well.

When Treize came out of the cabin, Yzma spoke to him.

“I can take those. —Where are you headed?”

“Oh. The bathroom. I’m using the one in the next cabin.”

“I see. It sounds lively in there.”

“For them, yeah. But I don’t really mind being left out.”

“No?”

“I mean, the lady would get bored if it were just me and her sitting quietly all throughout the trip.”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily the case...but I suppose a fun chat’s not so bad, either.”

Treize went into the next cabin over, which was where he slept at night.

Yzma watched him leave and muttered under his breath,

“You’re soft, Prince. Too soft.”

Once Treize was gone, Lillia and Hilda began talking about Major Travas.

“Do you see Major Travas often, Lillia?” Hilda asked, naturally curious.

Lillia tilted her head at times as she responded.

“No. Only once in a while.”

“I see. He is a busy man, I suppose,” Hilda said sadly.

“But I think he sees Mom pretty often.”

“Oh my,” Hilda replied, this time with a smile. But that did not last long.

“I guess it’s nice to have a boyfriend, even if you’re an adult.”

“What?”

Hilda blinked, furrowing her brow.

Lillia did not notice Hilda's confusion. She simply stared out the window and repeated something she'd once said to Meg.

"Mom always looks so happy on days she goes out with the major. When I see that, I think, oh. It must be nice, having a boyfriend. At the same time, I want Mom to be even happier. I want her to be happy forever. I'm all grown up now, and Major Travas is single, I think, so I wish they'd get married."

Hilda stared, wide-eyed. Several seconds later, Lillia looked straight at her.

"Hilda?"

"Oh, yes! Er...I'm sorry, Lillia. I was just a little surprised. You hadn't said a thing about your father."

"Oh, don't worry about it. My parents got married when my dad was in university, but he passed away in an accident before I was born. On a train to Sou Be-Il."

"I see..." Hilda nodded. *'I understand now—in order to serve my homeland and our kingdom, he—'*

Hilda stood from her seat, and unconcerned that her skirt would get dirty, knelt.

"Huh?"

She approached the surprised Lillia and gently embraced her, lightly kissing her forehead.

"On behalf of my homeland, I would like to express my gratitude. May the blessings of the angels of happiness be with you always."

"Huh?"

With a smile, Hilda returned to her seat.

"Er...thanks." Lillia chuckled awkwardly, not understanding what was going on.

At that point, Treize walked into the cabin with a knock.

He sensed the strange air in the cabin and raised an eyebrow. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing." "Nothing at all," the women replied in unison.

Treize was unconvinced, but he shrugged it off. Then,

"Oh, right! Would you like me to take a picture of you two?"

At that point,

"Ah—"

He realized his mistake.

"Actually, maybe—"

"Yes, please!" Hilda cut him off. She clasped her hands together ecstatically. "Please, do take a picture of Lillia and myself."

"I-is that all right?" Treize asked again for confirmation.

"But of course. Over here, Lillia," Hilda said, gesturing Lillia to her side.

"Yeah!"

Lillia crossed over to Hilda's side and smiled, meeting her gaze.

"Well then..."

Treize took out his camera—with which he was unable to photograph Major Travas—from his belt pack. Holding it in both hands, he sat where Lillia had just been sitting.

Treize held the camera vertically and captured the girls in the lens. He looked away from the viewfinder for a moment to gauge the distance between himself and the subjects, then adjusted the settings.



He turned the dial on the left side of the camera to wind the film. Then,  
“This should do.”

He reached over to the dial on the right side to adjust the shutter speed.

“I’m not as good as the person who taught me. I think I might get the exposure wrong, so I’ll be taking a few separate shots. All right—”

Hilda and Lillia leaned toward each other.

*Click.*

After one shot, the shutter speed dial rotated.

“A few more.”

Treize wound the film and changed the exposure each time, until he had taken about five shots.

“There. That should be enough. I’ve run out of film, too,” Treize said, once again turning the film dial on the upper left part of the camera.

“Thank you, Treize.”

“Thanks. Send me a copy, okay?”

“Of course. I’ll send copies to you both once I get it developed. By mail to Hilda.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks.”

Treize nodded, checked that the film was completely wound back, and opened the casing. Then he took out the cartridge and went over to his knapsack in the corner of the cabin—instead of his belt pack—and put it in a small box he kept in one of the pouches.



## **Chapter 5: The Motive**

It had been about two hours since the train departed Norn Station.

The sun was shining in the west at around 45 degrees from the ground. Under the blinding blue sky, the train continued down the tracks headed due north.

Around the tracks were not forests, but plains. There was not a spot of green to be seen on the plains. The brown earth was instead dotted with dirty patches of snow, and tiny sprouts beginning to poke out of the soil.

A group of men were playing cards to pass the time in the second class passenger car.

In the box seat in the front of the car and near the doorway sat the suit-clad man in his twenties, the soldier (who was about the same age) and the doctor in his thirties.

The men played their cards one after another on the small table by the windowsill.

“Damn...lost again,” the soldier said, playing a King from his overflowing hand.

“Don’t blame me too much,” said the man in his twenties, who played an Ace out of his nearly-finished hand.

It was the doctor’s turn. Of the two cards he had left, he played the second one.

“Whoa!” the suit-clad man shouted. The soldier wordlessly gathered up the pile of cards and placed them atop another pile on the empty seat.

“Terribly sorry,” the doctor said, flipping over his final card. It was a Three. He looked at the others. “Any last words?”

“Damn you.”

“Go to hell.”

The men replied at once. The doctor grinned. “If you’ll excuse me, then.” He held up the card, ready to grasp victory—

“Someone!”

The door slammed open with a shout, and the owner of the panicked voice leapt into the second class passenger car.

“Whoops!” The doctor flinched, dropping his card.

The soldier turned to the newcomer. The suit-clad man stood and looked up.

“Someone come quick! It’s an emergency!”

The newcomer was the husband of the couple who had been traveling in the second class sleeper car.

The three card players, the saleswoman, and the other passengers stared in confusion.

“What happened?” asked the soldier.

“Th-the student! He’s foaming at the mouth! It sounds like he’s in a lot of pain!”

“What?!”

“Anyway! Hurry, everyone!”

The soldier, though confused, leapt from his seat and asked where they were headed.

“The second class sleeper car! Number 4, two cars ahead!”

The man and the soldier took off. The suit-clad man and the doctor tossed their cards aside and followed.

The four men crossed the doorway and the coupling and headed into the second class sleeper car.

They ran clear through the first of the sleeper cars they passed. Several passengers heard the commotion and peered outside.

Then, they opened the the door to the car 4 corridor.

And—

“What the...?” “My god...” “Wha...”

The suit-clad man, the soldier, and the doctor reacted simultaneously.

The student with the bad leg was lying near the middle of the corridor.

He was completely still, diagonally blocking the corridor. His head was pointed at the men and his feet at the front of the train.

His face was ashen. White foam spewed from his mouth. His eyes were shut.

At the student’s feet was the woman in her thirties—the wife of the couple—having fallen to her knees.

“Hey! What happened here?!” the soldier demanded in a resounding voice. The woman flinched.

And the following happened.

The doctor squeezed past the people and approached the student.

Two of the cabin doors opened.

From behind one door peered out the old man’s secretary.

From the other door peered out Allison’s blue eyes and blond hair.

“EEEEEEK!”

The wife shrieked loudly enough to shake the car.

“Hey! Can you hear me?!” The doctor knelt by the student’s head and looked into his face.

“Doc! What’s happened here? Do something!” said the suit-clad man.

“Young man! Can you hear me?” the doctor asked, checking for a response. Then, he felt the student’s neck with his pointer and middle fingers. His expression darkened.

“Well?” the soldier urged, kneeling next to him.

“No consciousness. No pulse. No respiration,” the doctor recited mechanically. Then he began to wipe the foam from the student’s mouth with his own handkerchief.

“What’s going on?” Allison asked as she stepped outside and knelt at the student’s feet. The soldier turned to the man who had first alerted the car.

“What happened?”

“H-h-h-he was l-lying here by the time I g-got out here...f-foaming at the mouth...” the man stammered.

“Did you hear any raised voices?” asked Allison.

“N-no. I didn’t hear a thing. Y-you were in the car too. You didn’t hear anything, right?”

“No. I’m not surprised. Trains aren’t the most quiet of places.”

Allison examined the student’s face. The doctor was doing the same, even after he had wiped away the foam.

“Well, doc?” asked the suit-clad man.

“Can you save him?” Allison asked.

Four seconds of silence later,

“...I’m afraid it’s too late. He’s gone. There’s nothing we can do now,” the doctor said definitively, folding the student’s arms over his chest.

No one spoke for some time. All they could hear was the sound of the train’s wheels rolling over the tracks.

Twenty seconds later.

“Ugh!” The wife choked back a sob.

“Ahem. Just let me step over the body here!” The husband excused himself and leapt over the corpse, running to his wife. She was still sitting by the window in the corridor, hanging her head.

“L-let’s go inside, honey.”

He held her by the shoulders and took her into their cabin.

“What is this, doctor? What’s happened?” the soldier asked, getting to his feet.

“I’m not sure. If this is a case of poisoning, it’s not like any I’ve ever seen. I’m sorry. I just don’t have enough to go on at the moment,” the doctor replied.

The suit-clad man, Allison, the secretary, and the doctor all fell into silence for a time.

“Hey, wait!” the soldier suddenly cried.

The suit-clad man flinched and asked him what was wrong. The soldier began fuming as he raised his voice again. “It’s them! Those men in black! They must’ve poisoned his lunch!”

“N-no way...”

“What else could it be?” the soldier demanded confidently. Allison sighed.

“B-but...” the suit-clad man tried to respond, furrowing his brow.

“Let’s go!” The soldier ignored him and broke into a run. Not to the front of the train, where Major Travas was, but towards the back.

“Huh?” The suit-clad man breathed, confused.

But soon his questions were answered. The soldier returned, and not alone.

Behind him were most of the passengers onboard the train. The saleswoman, the tourist, the two businessmen from the second class sleeper car, and even Cohen the conductor were there. They came over through the narrow corridor.

The other passengers were flabbergasted when they saw the fallen student.

“Let’s all head to the dining car! We’re going to get some answers!” the soldier rallied them. The passengers nodded.

Ed was standing guard, cramped in the narrow doorway. All he could hear was the sound of the wheels under him.

Suddenly, he heard muted voices from the dining car.

He reacted immediately.

<This is the dining car. Requesting support,> Ed said into his microphone, and opened the door into the dining car.

He saw the passengers pushing toward him, incensed.

Without a word, Ed pulled out a handgun.

“Bang!” he threatened loudly. But he did not put his finger on the trigger.

The passengers, led by the soldier, froze.

“Hold it right there,” Ed said quietly, once the passengers had stopped near the middle of the car.

Lillia and Hilda were chattering about parasols with large holes. Treize was nodding along.

“Excuse me!” Yzma interrupted, stepping into the cabin. “We’ve got a bit of a situation.”

“Is there some trouble with the passengers?” Treize wondered, reading the look on Yzma’s face.

“Yes, actually. They’ve come all the way up to the dining car. I don’t know what’s happening, but I can tell you it’s nothing good. So on that note... Miss Lillia?”

Lillia stood.

“Yes?”

“It might not be a good idea for you to stay here. Come with me to the dining car—please go back to your cabin, and if the passengers ask questions just tell them that we wanted to talk to you about something. And Miss? Please stay here.”

“O-okay. Sorry if I caused you any trouble,” Lillia said, and turned to Hilda. “It was great getting a chance to talk to you, Hilda. I’ll get going now—it might be a little troublesome if I stayed. So I guess this is goodbye.”

Hilda offered Lillia a handshake. Lillia took it.

“I had so much fun, Lillia. I pray we’ll meet again someday.”

“Yeah.”

Lillia nodded, let go of Hilda’s hand, and walked over to the door. Treize watched silently.

“Go with her, Treize,” Hilda said, gently but firmly.

“What?” Treize asked, turning.

“It’s only right to escort a lady as she departs,” Hilda said sternly.

“Er...right. You’re right. I’ll go.”

Treize stood from his seat.

“Let’s go, Lillia.”

Yzma cast him a disapproving look.

The tension in the dining car had not abated in the least.

The plains outside either side of the car seemed to go on forever. It was calm and peaceful. But the dining car interior was anything but.

“Your people poisoned his food!” accused the soldier at the front of the mob.

“We did nothing of the sort. What reason would we have to poison a passenger?” Major Travas retorted calmly from the head of the other party.

“Then why’d the student die?!”

“We do not know. We would love to examine him ourselves, but you and the other passengers are the ones refusing to allow us the chance.”

“Don’t make me laugh! The student died foaming at the mouth! He was obviously poisoned by one of your lunches!”

Gathered behind the soldier was the suit-clad man, the saleswoman, the doctor, the secretary, and the other passengers.

Everyone was livid, but they did not necessarily have a good grasp of the situation. They simply listened to the angry soldier, not knowing what to add.

Allison, meanwhile, sat back in a chair to the side.

“Well, this is quite the pickle.”

She had her elbows on the table.

“Worst batch of passengers I’ve ever had,” the waiter groaned, taking shelter in the kitchen.

Right behind Major Travas stood Ed and Uno, two very large and imposing men. Both were holding their handguns. The guns were pointed at the ceiling, but their thumbs were ready to disarm the safety at a moment’s notice.

<I’m in the lady’s cabin. Maintaining security,> Ann reported through the radio, which fed directly into the men’s earpieces.

<Miss Lillia and Prince Treize have just returned to the dining car door. I’ll have them go past the doorway. I’ll also keep an eye on the roof,> Ozette added.

Soon the dining car door opened and Yzma, Treize, and Lillia emerged.

Allison noticed them first and slowly stood.

“You people killed—... Wh-what?” The angry soldier stopped mid-rant when he spotted Lillia and Treize, and turned to the suit-clad man behind him. “Who’re they?”

The suit-clad man shrugged.

Major Travas looked at the three, including Lillia, and said in a deliberately cold voice, “If you’ll head over that way, please. We have a bit of a problem on our hands.”

Though Lillia almost got angry, she did as she was told. She passed by Major Travas as every eye in the car watched, and walked past the tables and toward the soldier. Treize followed her.

“How...what were you doing over there?” asked the soldier.

“I had my reasons. Anyway, what’s going on here?” Lillia said confidently, ignoring the question.

The husband of the couple, who was the first to discover the student, briefly explained the situation.

The other passengers and Major Travas listened quietly as well. But the man’s explanation assumed entirely that the student had been poisoned by the people who distributed the lunches.

“What? That’s impossible.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Lillia answered the soldier’s question with ease.

“Because I know this man here. He has no reason to poison anyone.”

“So you’re with them! You’re in cahoots, aren’t you?”

“In cahoots?! We met by coincidence!”

“As if anyone would believe that.”

“Ugh! I’m telling the truth! Why else would I cross back over to this side? Well?”

“...Fine. Then what about your friend here?”

“Someone I know.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“...No.”

Treize finally managed a brief hello. Lillia ignored him and turned to the soldier again. “More importantly, we have to focus on the guy who died! Calm down!”

The soldier blinked. “I suppose you’re right... You’re acting awfully calm, missy. Aren’t you shocked that someone’s died?”

Lillia snorted.

“I’ve seen way too many dead bodies over the past year to get scared now.”

The soldier went silent.

Major Travas said, “Someone is dead, and we must take that fact very seriously. But I would like to speak on my team’s behalf—we provided those lunches to keep you out of the dining car, for security purposes. But we did not poison those lunches or do anything of the sort. Even if we wanted to, we did not have the time. If we’d poisoned *all* the lunches, everyone would be dead by now. And we have no reason to kill someone randomly by slipping poison in only one of the meals. *We* are the ones most troubled by this commotion.”

Five seconds of silence passed. A passenger conceded his point.

“Then what’s happening here?” asked the saleswoman.

“No one here can answer that question. All I can say is that you have no reason to be angry with us, or to be afraid. We must think of a plan of action. I ask that you set aside your hostility. Anger will only serve to worsen the situation at hand. Please, remain calm.”

Major Travas remained unfailingly composed. The two men standing with behind him with guns in hand made him quite convincing.

“Then—” the soldier began, but—

“Wait!” Major Travas cut him off. He pressed the earpiece in his right ear and focused.

Four seconds passed.

<Understood. We’ll take care of it,> he said into his microphone, and turned to the short-haired man beside him.

“Uno. Go.”

“Yessir.”

Uno holstered his gun.

As the passengers looked on in trepidation, Major Travas explained, “One of my subordinates has just reported that someone is walking along the roof of the train, towards the dining car.”

“Hm?”

“What?”

“Huh?”

“What the heck?”

The passengers could not hide their shock.

“What now?” Lillia groaned, looking at Treize.

“I’m not sure,” Treize replied.

“Impossible. Who could it be?” asked the suit-clad man.



“We’re not sure. It’s not one of my team. The figure is dressed in grey, and according to my subordinate is wearing something to conceal their face.”

The suit-clad man went quiet.

“I believe this character may be trying to cross the dining car. I’ll be sending my subordinate to investigate. —Uno. Capture them alive.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once Uno had left,

“Wh-what are you planning to do?” asked the soldier.

“Uno will lie in wait at the coupling and capture this person the moment they try to jump to the next car.”

“But—”

The soldier was cut off.

A dull thud sounded suddenly from the ceiling. The suit-clad man, the doctor, and the saleswoman looked up simultaneously.

The sounds mingled with the rhythmic shaking of the train, filling the dining car. Major Travas raised a finger to his lips. Ed had his gun trained on the spot where the strange figure was, ready to open fire at a moment’s notice.

As everyone, including Lillia and Treize, listened dubiously—

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

The sound passed over the passengers.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

The sound passed over Lillia and Treize.

*Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.*

The sound passed over Major Travas and Ed. Then—

*Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum—*

A set of frenetic footsteps. They could hear someone rushing along the rooftop. The sound became even more frenzied. The people in the dining car could clearly make out two sets of footsteps.

“They must’ve noticed Uno. Should we back him up, sir?” asked Yzma.

“No, it’s all right,” Major Travas replied.

*Thud. Bang. Thud. Bang.*

The footsteps turned to struggles.

It sounded like a gigantic rat was floundering on the roof. Everyone listened intently.

Then—

The noises seemed to grow louder, before giving way to the sound of something sliding. *Thud.* Something hit a frame on the right side of the car, and the window pane began to tremble.

The impact occurred right next to Treize. He turned.

“WHOA!”

He flinched.

Before his eyes was a person in grey, wearing a balaclava that obscured their face, hanging upside-down against the window. Their eyes met for a moment.

“Wh-what the?!” Lillia gasped, stepping away. Treize did as well, but because Lillia was blocking the way between the tables, he had to move over beside the next table.

“Pull him in, Ed,” Major Travas ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

Ed clung to the frame and opened the window. A rush of wind and noise filled the car. He grabbed the person by their grey clothes.

<Ed’s got him. You may let go, Uno,> Major Travas ordered over the radio.

“Hah!”

With a spirited cry, Ed pulled the suspicious figure into the dining car. Though the figure wasn’t very large, it was still no easy feat to drag them bodily—which only spoke for Ed’s incredible strength.

The person’s knees were caught on the windowsill, but Ed pulled anyway. The figure’s feet dragged against the table and pulled off the tablecloth. The menu and the tiny bowl of sugar on the table fell.

“EYAAAAGH!”

The strange figure, who had fallen to the floor back-first with a shriek, flailed wildly. Ed smacked them on the forehead.

“Agh!”

The person was concussed by the impact.

“Urgh...”

And with a moan, they stopped moving.

As the passengers watched in stunned silence, Uno slid inside through the wide-open window. He moved like an acrobat as he used the windowsill as a step into the car.

Once he was inside, Uno closed the window. The howling of the wind stopped. The car was quiet again.

There was some dirt on Uno’s back, but his jacket wasn’t torn or messy. Calmly, he glanced at the passengers.

“What the hell are these people...?” the soldier hissed.

As the passengers watched, Major Travas and Uno approached the fallen figure on the floor, who was wearing grey coveralls.

Without a word, Ed reached for the balaclava. Every eye in the car was on the figure’s face.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

“Huh?”

“How?”

A small commotion arose the moment the figure was unmasked.

Major Travas silently looked down at her face.

“Th-this is...” Lillia stammered, standing with her back to the window. “The woman with the baby!”

Lying unconscious on the floor was one of the passengers—the wife of the couple. She was the woman with short black hair who had boarded with a baby in tow.

“What’s going on here?” the soldier demanded, turning around.

The suit-clad man, the doctor, the saleswoman, and the other passengers all turned to the husband, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder among them.

“No! Impossible!” the husband cried, squeezing past the passengers.

He rushed down the aisle, past the soldier. He tried to reach his fallen wife, but just 3 meters before her Ed silently held out his arms to stop him.

“Hey! What is this?!”

“We’re not sure ourselves. But we’d like to hear your side of the story,” said Major Travas.

“This has got to be a trap!” the man cried, “My wife wouldn’t do something like this! You’re trying to frame us! She’s supposed to be watching our baby in the cabin! Our baby girl! She’s only five months old!” he demanded. “I get it now! One of your men crossed the roof while we were all busy here and dragged my wife over! Have you got any proof that she walked all the way here? All we had to go by was the sound! You bastards are trying to make her out to be the culprit!”

No one said anything.

Major Travas’s team were coldly staring at the husband.

The passengers, on the other hand, were confused. Not knowing what to do or say, all they could do was stand there.

The husband retorted loudly.

“Don’t let these goons fool you! They’re behind this! They poisoned the student and now they’re trying to frame my wife!”

“Er...well. I don’t...” the soldier, who had until just earlier been leading the angry charge, tried to speak.

“We’ll take ‘em all on! We’ve got numbers on our side!”

“C-calm down there. These people have guns, and from the way they act, they’re definitely not civilians...”

The soldier’s earlier fervor was gone. The suit-clad man and the doctor were also hanging back.

Lillia and Treize said nothing. Their eyes met over the table.

Lillia tilted her head, as if asking Treize what was happening.

Treize lightly shook his head. He didn’t know a thing.

Allison was also watching the angry man from amidst the passengers.

Major Travas spoke.

“I have a few questions for you. If you and your wife could come with us to the next car, we will hear you out—you haven’t done anything yet, unlike your wife.”

“R-right...” The man nodded, and slowly approached Major Travas. Then—

Without warning, he rushed at Treize, who stood beside him.

“Huh? Whoa!”

Treize, who was looking at Major Travas, was unable to react in time. The man punched him in the chest.

“Koff!”

Treize hit his back against the windowsill. He fell helplessly to the floor.

Not a moment later, the man leapt over an entire table and landed before Lillia.

By the time he had landed, he was holding a knife that he had drawn from his left sleeve. It was a thin, double-edged blade about 10 centimeters in length. The handle was colored a matte black.

“Eek!”

He quickly grabbed Lillia as she tried to run. He wrapped his left arm around her and brandished the knife before her face.

“Nobody move!” he cried. “Everyone stay where you are, or the girl gets it!”

The man and Lillia were standing near the center of the dining car. He stood with the left-side windows at his back, with Lillia before him as a shield.

To the man’s left—the front of the car—were the fallen woman and Major Travas’s team, about 3 meters away.

To his right were the confused passengers with the soldier in the lead, about 5 meters away.

And at a table to his right, about two meters away—

“Koff! Ugh...that hurt...”

Treize staggered to his feet, coughing. He looked at Lillia—clearly angry about her situation—and the man—clearly ready to kill—and swore.

“Damn it!”

“Kid! Get over to the other passengers now! Or else...” the man threatened, pushing the knife closer to Lillia.

Treize glared. He glanced at Major Travas’s team behind the man, and noticed Major Travas nod. Treize did as he was told and backed away.

From the back of the crowd, Allison quietly reached into her jacket.

Uno and Ed took low stances, feet spread and aiming their guns with the safety disarmed. They were naturally pointing at the man, but Lillia was in the line of fire.

“So who’re you gonna believe?!” the man cried suddenly. “Me, or these suspicious freaks? Well, soldier?!”

“I—you can’t expect me to—” the soldier said, giving away his hesitation. The suit-clad man spoke up.

“This is going too far, don’t you think? Even if these men are in the wrong, you shouldn’t be taking a young girl hostage...”

“Shut up! How is anybody supposed to believe these people?! If I let them take me and my wife, they’re going to use truth serum, torture, and whatever else they’ve got up their sleeve! We fell for their trap! We’re better off fighting back! We can’t just surrender to them!” the man roared, spit flying.

Lillia grimaced as he yelled right next to her ear. But she did not put up a fight, quietly waiting with a weary look that spoke for how sick of hostage situations she was.

“What are you planning to do?” asked the soldier.

He was looking at the men on the other side of the car, their guns trained on the hostage-taker, and at the even colder bespectacled man commanding them.

“Look. You can’t beat these people,” said the soldier, “If you’re so worried, I’ll go in when they’re interro- I mean, questioning your wife to make sure they don’t do anything funny. It’s all fine as long as they’re not trying to frame anyone, right?”

“Shut your mouth! You’re not helping!”

“... Well, no, but...”

The soldier went silent, unable to deny the accusation.

“Stop this train! I’m getting off here. Somebody pull the emergency brake!” the man demanded. But none of the passengers reacted. Nor did Major Travas’s team.

“Wait a minute,” someone said. It was a composed, female voice.

“Wh-who said that?”

“Over here. —Excuse me, coming through.”

Allison squeezed past the passengers and went to Treize. Then, she walked even further, down the aisle between the tables.

“S-stay back, or I—”

“Right, right. We’ll talk. Should I step back?”

Calmly, Allison took a slow step back. The man had his back to the left-side windows. Allison stood with the right-side windows behind her. They were about 3 meters apart.

At the center point of the line between Major Travas’s team and the passengers was drawn another line, this time with Allison and the man holding Lillia hostage.

“Wh-who’re you?”

“Me? I’m the girl’s mother. We’re traveling together,” Allison said calmly.

“So what?! I’m not letting the kid go. I’m not going to die here! Those suits are *not* going to take me!”

“Calm down. That’s not what I want to say.”

“Hah! Then what? You’re volunteering to take her place or something?” the man snorted, moving his left arm with Lillia still wrapped in it, and brandishing his knife.

“Oh my. Actually, yes,” Allison said nonchalantly.

“What?”

The man froze.

“Yes. My dear Lillia is very timid and easy to scare. You won’t have an easy time taking her along as a hostage,” Allison said amicably.

Lillia frowned, but the man did not notice.

“I’ll be your hostage in my poor daughter’s place. So let her go!” Allison said, taking several steps towards the man. She made a point of raising her own voice.

As the passengers looked on in silence and Major Travas’s team held their positions, Lillia stared as if her mother had been replaced by an alien.

“And if I refuse...?” the man said. Allison smiled.

“That wouldn’t be a very good idea. I’d ask you to reconsider,” she said, taking another step forward.

“Agh...”

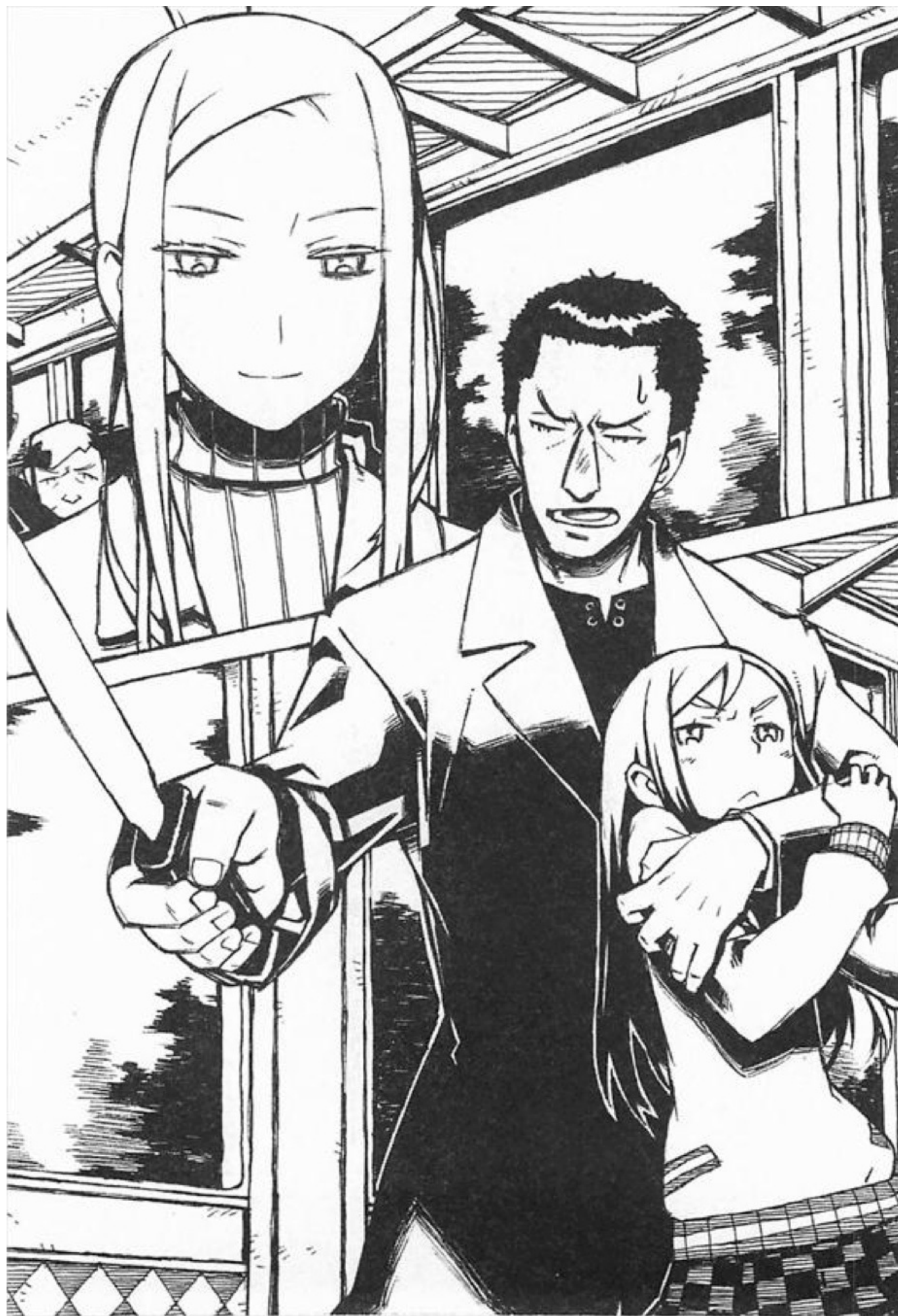
Lillia noticed Allison reach into the right-side pocket on her jacket, which the passengers couldn’t see.

“S-stay back! I’m warning you!”

The man pointed his knife at Allison. But he could not finish his sentence.

Allison withdrew her right hand. And she pointed a certain object at the man’s face.

*Bang.*



There was a gunshot.

A tiny shell casing leapt into the air, then hit the table and bounced against the windowsill before falling to the floor.

A smoking dent was left on the wooden frame, only 30 centimeters from the dazed man's face.

In Allison's right hand was a small automatic handgun. It gave off a dull glint, held completely out of the knife's range.

"Wh-what the hell are you...?"

"Like I said, I'm the girl's mother."

"D-don't you care if I stab your little girl?"

"It's too late for that. It'll be faster for me to pull the trigger than it will be for you to move. I missed on purpose, you know. You should be thanking me."

"Y-you seriously think you can shoot a man?"

"Oh my. I'll have you know that I once personally shot a man to death on a moving train. Don't underestimate me."

Allison was smiling. There were beads of sweat on the man's face.

Major Travas's face stiffened. He was anxious—it was a face he had never shown his subordinates. Thankfully, both Uno and Ed were too distracted by the hostage situation to notice.

"Let me make a suggestion. Drop your weapon, and I'll spare your life. And as soon as we reach the next station, we'll hand you over to the police and not these suspicious people. Your wife, too."

The man was silent.

"But if you don't... Well, I'm giving you five seconds. Five four three two—" Allison began counting down very quickly.

"A-all right all right! Fine!"

The man let go of the knife. It fell to the floor.

"There."

The moment the man's arm relaxed, Lillia pulled herself out and escaped, as casual as though she were on her way to get the mail.

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome, honey."

Lillia moved out of Allison's line of fire and stepped away from the man. And she joined the dazed passengers at the back of the car.

"Phew..." Major Travas breathed a sigh of relief.

Treize did as well. He withdrew his right hand, which had been in his belt pack since before Allison had drawn. He was not holding anything.

The man once called 'Prisoner 42' was watching it all, from the moment Treize had reached into his belt pack to the moment he withdrew his hand after the commotion.

"Thank you. I won't open fire without warning now. And I won't hand you over to those people," Allison said, her gun still trained on the man. Major Travas's men lowered their weapons. And they quietly stepped behind him.

"I-I didn't want to do this! Please, you have to believe me! I was just scared..." the man pleaded, leaning against the window. Allison nodded.

"I understand, but I have a few questions for you. May I?"

"Wh-what? What do you want to know?"

"Well," Allison said, "You killed the student, didn't you?"

The man blanched. A hushed commotion erupted among the passengers.

"Hm?" Major Travas furrowed his brow. His men glanced at him.

"Wh-what are you talking about? Why would I—"

"You did, right?"

Allison was confident. The man was silent.

"What should we do?" Uno whispered to Major Travas.

"It might be easier to let things play out. We still have time until we reach the next station. We'll leave things in her hands. But make sure she ends her involvement quickly."

"Yes, sir."

With her gun still trained on the man, Allison dealt the final blow. "It looks like I should explain myself. You there! Private!"

"Ma'am!" The soldier responded almost reflexively, standing up straight and saluting. The other passengers flinched.

"This man went to the second class passenger car to tell you about the student, right? Then you all rushed over."

"Yes, ma'am. We were playing cards together at the time," the soldier recounted, nodding. Allison turned to the man.

"But you didn't have to go all the way back there. There were other passengers in the same car, including me. You could have just called for help in that car. So why didn't you do that?"

The man said nothing. The suit-clad man nodded in vague agreement.

"It's easy to see why you didn't," Allison continued, "You wanted to convince as large a crowd as possible that the student was poisoned. There were simply more people in the second class passenger car."

"I get it!" Lillia said, clapping her hands together.

"I want someone—any two people here—to go to the second class sleeper car where this man and his wife were."

"Why? There shouldn't be anyone there. —Except for the quiet old man, I suppose," said the saleswoman.

"First, check if the student's body is still in the corridor. And bring back the baby—we can't leave her alone in that cabin."

"All right. Someone come with me. ... You there."

The saleswoman left the dining car with the suit-clad man in tow.

"I'll go, too," Treize volunteered. Allison nodded, and he followed.

The soldier, the secretary, and the doctor watched them leave.

"Is the wife awake?" asked Allison.

"No," Ed replied.

Time passed in silence.

About three minutes later, they heard loud footsteps heading for the dining car.

"Th-this is bad!" the suit-clad man cried as he rushed back. Treize was hot on his heels.



They both looked like they'd seen a ghost. The saleswoman followed after, panting heavily.

"What's going on?" asked the soldier. The suit-clad man replied,

"Th-they're gone!"

"Who?" asked a passenger.

"I knew it." "I knew it." Allison and Major Travas whispered under their breaths simultaneously.

"The student—I mean, the body's gone! It's not in the corridor where we left it! And it's not in the couple's cabin, either!"

He paused and took a deep breath. Then he continued, to the shock of everyone but Allison, Major Travas, and the husband.

"And the baby's gone, too! Basket and all!"

"I checked, too. We didn't find anything. We checked all the cabins in the car, but the only one there was the quiet old man," Treize continued. The saleswoman, red with anger, demanded to know where the baby was.

Allison looked at the husband, who hung his head.

"You threw them away."

"Wh-what do you mean, ma'am?" asked the soldier. But a second later, he seemed to realize. "No... They didn't..."

He could not continue.

"She wasn't your baby, was she?" asked Allison. The husband did not reply. "This woman isn't your wife, either. You two used the baby as a cover to feign being a couple. No one would suspect a couple with a baby. It's the perfect cover. You must have either kidnapped the girl or adopted her from a facility under false pretenses."

The man did not respond.

"You sabotaged the other train to have us transfer to this one, then poisoned the student and stirred up a commotion. And while we were distracted in the dining car, the woman would have crossed the roof to head to the cars beyond. It's not the best plan I've seen, but it partly worked."

"Then what about the baby?" the saleswoman asked, pale. Allison continued plainly.

"I don't know how you were planning to escape, but the woman probably threw the student's body onto the other tracks or the grass to get rid of evidence. No one would have witnessed it, since all the second class passengers would be here. You must have done the same with the baby."

"My word..." the saleswoman gasped, putting a hand to her mouth. Allison added that she was just hypothesizing, and turned to the man.

"Am I right?"

He did not reply.

"What is your goal?"

He said nothing.

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine. I'm keeping my promise—I won't turn you over to those men. We'll hear the rest at the police station at the next stop. Taking my daughter hostage is reason enough to have you arrested."

Still the man remained silent.

“And we’re done here. Is everyone happy?” Allison asked, looking at the passengers and at Major Travas’s team. No one objected.

Allison took a step forward and picked up the fallen knife by the blade, and then took two steps back.

Only when she had placed the knife on the table did she finally arm the safety on her gun again and lower it.

“I swear, every time I decide to go somewhere...” Lillia groaned, sighing.

“It was him...” the man muttered. All eyes turned to him.

The man leaned weakly against the window and whispered.

“He’s the one who convinced us to do this...”

“What are you talking about? Who?” Allison asked gently. The man hung his head, pale, and continued.

“I...I was released from prison recently. Didn’t have a job. And about 10 days ago...a man called me. And told me some strange things.”

“Like what?”

“He said we could make easy money on this train... That these suits are working for a big jewelry company cross-river, and they’re smuggling a load of jewels from Iks to Iltoa...”

Allison shrugged. The soldier asked Major Travas if what the man said was true.

“We can’t tell you the details, but that claim is absolutely untrue. This man has been fooled,” Major Travas said firmly.

But Major Travas still found himself grimacing at the fact that there had been an information leak, even if the details were wrong. Uno cast him a glance—he must have thought the same.

“What about your pretend-wife?” asked Allison.

“I don’t know who she is. Not even her name. I just know she’s like me. An ex-con. She says she heard the same thing from the guy on the phone... I followed instructions and met up with her. We thought this might work, so we decided to cooperate.”

“So you weren’t the masterminds.”

“No. It was all him. He gave us the train number and got us money and clothes. And a massive deposit. He said he’d sabotage the train so we could board the next one—the target. And that’s what happened. He said he’d cause a commotion when the time came, and that we could get the jewels then. That happened, too. We were convinced things were going well for us until then...it was so easy...but who knew she’d walk so loudly over the roof?”

“I have to say, that’s incredible. Not you, the mastermind. Where did you get the baby?”

“He gave her to us. We found her in a coin locker in Elitèsa Station last night... Along with a note. Said we should use her as a cover. We were planning to get rid of her from the beginning,” the man admitted.

“You’re inhuman! You deserve hell! I’ll send you there myself!” the saleswoman howled, lunging forward. The other passengers stopped her.

“That’s another charge, then. Did you meet the man in person?”

“No. He sent me the money by mail, and his voice on the phone always sounded distorted. Like a broken radio.”

“I see. How did you poison the student?” Allison asked. But this time, the man grew desperate.

“No! We didn’t! We didn’t poison him! It wasn’t us!”

“Huh?”

“I never poisoned him! I— koff!”

Out of nowhere, the man began vomiting blood.

“Grah!”

With a chilling scream, he jerked upwards.

Blood spewed from his mouth like a fountain, staining the window and the white tablecloths.

As everyone watched, the man twitched and coughed up blood. His head and back hit the window before he fell helplessly forward.

Once he hit the carpet, he did not move an inch. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he threw up blood. He was dead in a matter of seconds.

Allison looked down at his body bitterly.

“Oh...”

With a sigh, Lillia held a moment of silence.

“Induce vomiting. Now!” Major Travas ordered just as the man died.

Ed and Uno sat the woman upright, and made her lean forward—

“Koff!”

The woman jerked.

“Shit...”

As Uno watched, the woman began to cough up blood.

Ed shook his head. Uno laid her on the floor again. Blood spilled from her mouth. Air escaped her lungs at times, creating red foam on her lips.

“They’ve both passed. I believe poison capsules may have dissolved in their stomachs.”

In the middle of the dining car lay the body of the man and woman who had pretended to be husband and wife. There were red stains on the white tablecloths over their faces.

“It’s not likely suicide. They probably ingested the poison without knowing.” Uno concluded his report, returning to Major Travas’s side.

“What in the world is going on here...?” the soldier wondered, speaking for the other passengers behind him.

Allison, standing near the middle of the car, sighed. “So now we’re out of leads again.”

“Geez. And I was having such a good time making a cool friend in first class, too. I must be cursed. That must be it. It’s a curse,” Lillia grumbled.

Treize watched things unfold silently, standing amidst the passengers.

“They got what they deserved.” the saleswoman spat coldly behind him.

“Are you there, Mr. Cohen?” Major Travas asked, and glanced at his wristwatch.

“Oh. Yes. Just one moment, sir,” Cohen replied, stepping forward. He was white as a sheet. He crept past the bodies and the bloodstains in the carpet and went to Major Travas.

“How much longer to the next station?”

“Oh! Yes...er...” Cohen took out a timetable and a pocket watch. “Not for a while, sir. At least two more hours.”

“Is there anywhere on the way where we can stop the train? Somewhere that won’t affect the next train on the line?”

“Hm? Let me see... There *is* a place about 10 or 20 minutes ahead. It’s an emergency line that doubles as a freight depot. But...”

“Perfect. Please stop the train there and separate the cars,” Major Travas ordered.

“Yes—what?” Cohen squawked. “Wh-what did you say?”

“I want you to separate the train. Have the locomotive run with just the VIP car and the first class sleeper car in tow, leaving the rest behind. We cannot continue with the passengers so long as there is a threat to our security. But we cannot leave the passengers in the open, so we will leave their cars behind.”

“...I’m afraid that’s—”

“Please make it possible.”

Cohen the conductor went silent.

“Maybe that’s not a bad idea. Frankly, I don’t want to travel with those people anymore. I shouldn’t have gotten on this train,” said the suit-clad man.

“Yeah...”

“We’ve got nothing to do with this.”

“Get ‘em away.”

Voices of consent followed.

“You can’t just leave us! At least take us to the next station!” the doctor said defiantly. Another passenger agreed.

At that moment—

“I...I suppose it wouldn’t be impossible,” Cohen said, after a long moment’s thought.

“What do you mean?” asked Allison. Cohen responded.

“They always have a few locomotives stationed at the depot. If we can just get permission from the operations office in Raputoa, we might be able to use one to get the rest of the cars to the next station—but no further.”

“That’s good enough. We need to go to the police, anyway.”

“So that’s the end of the line, huh.”

Allison nodded in understanding. Lillia groaned.

Major Travas asked for the passengers’ consent. No one objected.

\* \* \*

About 20 minutes before they would reach the depot, Cohen contacted the office by radio and explained the situation. When he asked to split the train, the supervisor gave him his begrudging permission.

<I suppose if it’s an emergency...> the supervisor said, annoyed.

Hilda alone had known nothing about the goings-on in the train, but Major Travas gave her a briefing and added that they would be splitting the train.

“I understand. I give you my permission,” Hilda said with a smile, “It’s a shame that I won’t be able to speak with Lillia on this trip anymore. But will you give us the chance to meet again sometime? Even if it has to be in Sfrestus?”

With a complicated look, Major Travas replied that he would try.

Allison and Lillia were gathered with the other passengers in the second class passenger car.

The passengers had all the cheer of a group of funeral guests. But when Major Travas and Ed dropped off Treize—carrying a backpack—among the passengers, everyone grew curious.

“Aren’t you with them, kid? Who are you?” the soldier asked the question on everyone’s minds. Treize replied without even blinking.

“I’m a guide from Ikstova. I was helping them along from my homeland, but they kicked me out just now. I don’t really mind—I didn’t want to stay with them anymore, anyway.”

“I see. Sorry to hear that.”

Treize took a seat a little ways away from Allison and Lillia, and watched the world quickly pass by outside the window. The monotonous spring landscape sped past his eyes.

\* \* \*

In the middle of a vast plain untouched by buildings or fields was a lone depot. Next to its tiny lodgings were several diesel locomotives and water and fuel tank cars.

A tiny light shone on the southern horizon. It was a train’s headlights.

The train approached, slowing as it left the main line. And it finally came to a full stop on a set of tracks parallel to the main one.

The man once called ‘Prisoner 42’ watched the scenery and glanced at his wristwatch, whispering to himself.

“Right on schedule. Perfect.”

**-Continued in Part 2-**

★小生意気なガキ・超拡大版★



## **Carlo's Excellent Adventure - Prelude**

This story took place in the summer of the year 3305 of the World Calendar.

It was around the time Lillia was plowing through her homework in her house at the Capital District, because she had nothing else to do after returning early from the crazy trip to Lartika.

It was also around the time Treize was half-meditating on the swimming manual he'd bought as he ate his food next to his mud-covered motorcycle, somewhere smack-dab in the middle of Roxche.

This story took place in Healer Village in Tolcasia.

Healer Village was a small town on the shores of the Kurz Sea, where Lillia and Treize were caught in a plot and ended up crashing a massive seaplane into the lake.

"A farewell ceremony?"

"Yeah. For the Master. It's gonna be in the afternoon."

"Huh."

A group of children were talking amongst themselves in the backyard of a small building on the edge of the village.

This was an orphanage set up by Ein Morseau—known as 'Master' to the locals—before his passing. It would be another month before the orphanage was renamed 'Ein Morseau Children's Home' in the wake of his sudden death.

It was around dusk. The cloud-dotted sky was dyed red, and a gentle wind caressed the lake.

Among the children, who ranged in age from five to ten, was a redhead who stood with crossed arms, leaning against a tree. The child wore a brown shirt and long black pants.

This was the child who had just said, 'Huh'.

"Once you're dead, it's over."

This particular child was not like the others, who were all quite downcast. Though there was a shadow over her face, she did not show much sympathy. The others glared.

The redhead glared back, and the children looked away. She must have been quite high on the totem pole in the orphanage.

"So what's a farewell ceremony? Is it different from a funeral?" asked the redhead. Another child responded, reciting word-for-word what the adults had said.

That the Master had written a will, where he asked that no money be spent on his funeral. So to honor his wish, the orphanage had decided to hold a simple memorial service for him.

"Huh. That's it? That's kind of sad."

"What else can you do? That was his last will. And we don't have the money for a funeral."

"Not even for flowers?"

"Nope."

"Huh."

The redhead looked up at the sky for a moment before looking back down. "Guys, huddle 'round."

Two adults were watching quietly from behind the curtains in a room on the second floor.

“That’s Carlo, Miss Angela. She’s actually a girl, but she gets angry if you call her ‘Carla’,” a middle-aged woman in an apron said to a woman in her thirties who stood on the other side of the window.

“The redhead?” said Miss Angela. She was in a blue business suit. Miss Angela was tall and slender, with semi-long black hair. Her large eyes glinted amidst her sun-scorched skin, giving her an air of energy and confidence.

Miss Angela was not one of the orphanage staff. She was a teacher at the village primary school.

Carlo was the center of attention. She was confidently discussing something with the others.

“I see. She won’t be easy,” Miss Angela smiled half-belligerently.

The middle-aged woman, on the other hand, was fretting. “She’s certainly quite the handful. But she was sweet as a lamb with the Master. I don’t know how we’ll cope with her, now that the Master’s passed. And of all things, she became a ringleader of sorts among the children after the seaplane crash. I worry for how she’ll influence the others.”

“I see.”

“We’re most afraid that she might try to run away from the facility. The Master was the one who convinced her to stay, but now... We’re also afraid that if she leaves, the other children may follow.”

“But you’re not seeing any evidence of that yet?”

“Not yet...”

“Maybe you’re worrying too much?”

“No! We must do our best now in the Master’s absence—we couldn’t face him in heaven if we didn’t do right by him and the children! We couldn’t live with ourselves if Carlo were to run away. We need your help, Miss Angela!”

“Yes, yes. I’ll keep an eye on her specifically until the day after tomorrow.”

“Please do. I’m sure Carlo will change her mind if we all come together as a family at the farewell ceremony.”

“That would be wonderful,” Miss Angela replied with a wry smile. Then she changed the subject, “In any case, are you sure you wouldn’t like the school to send something for the ceremony? The headmaster wanted to at least send some flowers.”

“We appreciate the sentiment—we truly do. But the headmaster’s condolences are all we will accept. The orphanage should be preparing all these things—and we just don’t have the funds. Thank you. And we’re terribly sorry,” the middle-aged woman apologized.

“I see... I understand,” Miss Angela said. She did not bring up the flowers again.

Incidentally, it was a little further down the line that rich people from the Capital District who retired in unusually quick succession began to donate frequently to the orphanage.

The dinner bell began ringing throughout the building. The children rushed inside.

“Then I’ll be staying at the facility tomorrow. I’ll keep my eyes locked on Carlo,” Miss Angela said, looking out the window. Shadows were growing long on the ground, and Carlo happened to look up.



Could she see Miss Angela? Or not? Their eyes seemed to meet for a moment.

"I accept your challenge."

Carlo disappeared from her sight.

That night.

The children's beds were lined up in the large room. A young female staff member walked around the room with a lantern in hand to check that all the children were there, and left.

The door opened soon after, and a small figure slipped inside.

"I'm back."

The voice belonged to Carlo.

"Hey."

"You're here."

"Welcome back."

"We've been waiting."

Some of the children responded. Carlo stood at the center of the children, who had slipped out of their beds and gathered around her.

"All right. Lemme go over the plan again. Tomorrow's the big day," Carlo said, taking something out of her pocket.

It was money. Two coins engraved with leaf designs. She had received the money from Lillia earlier as proper payment for her service. It was not a small amount.

A small commotion erupted.

"It's finally time to use these." Carlo smirked. "I'm leaving town tomorrow. Don't—"

The next day.

It was early in the morning, before the children were awake.

"There."

Miss Angela, decked out in sweats, rode her bicycle to the orphanage and joined the staff.

Carlo and the children woke up and had breakfast together. Miss Angela kept a keen lookout from outside the window.

After breakfast, everyone helped clean up and wash the dishes. There were no classes that day. So the 30 or so children at the orphanage spent the day playing to their heart's content. Of course, the only playgrounds they had were the orphanage building, the yard, the nearby park, and the endlessly vast Kurz Sea.

Carlo was talking with the children in the yard.

"No suspicious activity yet."

Miss Angela watched from beside a door, a little ways away. Next to her was her trusty bicycle. She was ready to ride at a moment's notice.

"Not yet, Carlo? At this rate, the bus is gonna leave," said one of the children.

Carlo had climbed a large tree and was lazily watching the lake from atop a thick branch. The lake glittered as peacefully as it always did.

"Not yet," Carlo said quietly.

"Why not? Yesterday you said we'd start early—"

“Someone’s on to us,” Carlo said.

She then told the others to take turns looking at the door.

“The door?”

The children did as they were told. One at a time, they glanced at the door, looking as natural as they could be.

There they spotted Miss Angela. And her menacing bicycle.

“She’s been looking at me all morning.”

“No way...you really think she’s found us out?”

“I dunno. But she’s definitely keeping watch on me.”

“Wh-what do we do?”

“I’ll wait for the afternoon bus instead. All of you, make sure you’re ready to go at a moment’s notice,” Carlo said with a glint in her eye.

At that moment, the bus to the next village—one of two that stopped every day—passed by the door where Miss Angela was hiding.

The bus would wait at the stop about 100 meters away, and then head to the next village.

“How is she?” asked the middle-aged woman. Miss Angela responded honestly.

“I don’t think she’s planning an escape.”

They were whispering from a distance as the children dug into their lunches in the cafeteria.

Carlo and her followers were dipping bread into bowls of stew, downing them voraciously.

“She was playing in the lake with the other children all morning.”

“I see...” the middle-aged woman said, and feared that perhaps she had worried too much.

“But...”

“But?” The middle-aged woman looked at Miss Angela.

Miss Angela crossed her arms. “I could see it in her eyes. Carlo is up to something.”

“Oh my...can you really tell?”

“Yes.”

“That’s incredible. I’m sure your long years of experience—”

Miss Angela cut off the middle-aged woman, smiling.

“No. I can tell because I was just like her when I was her age.”

Lunch and clean-up went smoothly. It was nap time for most of the children.

Carlo and her friends napped. Just like the others.

The middle-aged woman went around the room, making sure the children were covered properly in their blankets. Miss Angela followed, scrutinizing the children. In Carlo’s case, she took a very long look at her face. She was making sure that Carlo really was asleep.

Eventually, the children woke up one after another. Carlo and her friends did as well.

And as they made to leave the room,

“Wh-where are you going to play in the afternoon?” the middle-aged woman asked awkwardly.

“On the second floor,” Carlo replied. The middle-aged woman smiled, saying that was a great idea.

Though, as soon as she left the room, Carlo added quietly—

“We’re playing tag, though.”

Carlo and friends went up the stairs in the middle of the building, which were the only stairs in the orphanage.

Miss Angela watched with a smile from the doors. Her bicycle stood threateningly outside.

“She’s serious, huh. But she’s not gonna stop me,” Carlo mumbled.

“She’s serious, huh. But she’s not getting away from me,” Miss Angela mumbled.

There was a large playroom on the second floor.

In the room were toy blocks and rides straight out of a storybook. There were about 20 children in the room.

Carlo and her friends were gathered in a circle by the window in the corner.

“This is cool!”

“Ahaha!”

“Check this out!”

They chattered very loudly at times as they read storybooks.

But between the shrieks—

“Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Trust me.”

“We need to work together. Timing is key.”

Suspicious conversations were taking place.

It was afternoon.

The bus would arrive soon.

Ever since Carlo disappeared upstairs, Miss Angela had been sitting at the doors.

At times, the children begged her to play with them. But—

“I’m sorry, kids. I’m waiting for a guest,” she would say, sending the children away.

Sometimes children would come downstairs and go outside, but Carlo was not among them.

Miss Angela asked a staff member who had gone upstairs what Carlo was doing.

“She’s reading with the other children. Oh, and she told me she wanted learn how to play cat’s cradle, and asked me if I could get her some string sometime. She can be surprisingly adorable sometimes.”

Afternoon was halfway over.

“I know she’s after the bus. And she must have the fare on hand. But I’m not letting her get through. Now...how will you respond?” Miss Angela muttered to herself.

“Eek! What do you think you’re doing?! Get down this instant!” cried a female staff member upstairs.

“So you’ve started!”

Miss Angela rose from her seat. But she did not go.

“Please check the second floor,” she said to another woman who had rushed out of the staff room. Miss Angela remained at the doorway, checking outside. She did not see any children running for the door yet.

The woman rushed back down the stairs, her face pale. “Two of the children tried to climb down the gutter!”

But Miss Angela replied instantly, “But they didn’t go too far, did they? They stuck close to the window.”

“Y-yes! How did you...”

“That was a diversion. It’s a simple trick. Children aren’t brave enough to climb down a gutter. I wasn’t either, when I was their age.”

“I see...”

Then,

“Ow...” “Sorry.”

An angry woman came down the stairs, holding two children by the backs of their shirts. Neither of them were Carlo.

“Carlo is still upstairs, yes?” Miss Angela confirmed. The woman nodded and dragged the children into the staff room to lecture them as usual.

At that moment, they heard loud footsteps at the staircase.

A child rushed down, sprinting for the wide-open front doors. The child was not wearing the same clothes as Carlo, but wore a hat that hid their face.

“Tch!”

Miss Angela had no choice. She went to stop the child. She stood boldly in the child’s way and raised her voice.

“Stop!”

The child flinched and slowed down.

“No running in the halls!”

Miss Angela grabbed the child by the collar.

She took off the child’s hat. It wasn’t Carlo after all.

“Another diversion...”

It was a boy about the same size as Carlo, who often hung out with her.

“Lecture this one, too,” Miss Angela said, turning to the woman standing at the staff room door with two children ready for a scolding.

At that moment—

“EEK!”

A girl screamed from upstairs.

“Oh!”

Miss Angela and the two women looked up.

“Carlo fell out the window!”

At the same time,

“That idiot!” “Carlo! You said this was gonna work!” “What happened?!”

The children were in an uproar.

“Tch!”

Miss Angela ran. Not upstairs, but towards the front door.

“If Carlo comes down the stairs, stop her at all costs!” she commanded one of the staff as she sprinted.

Once she was out, Miss Angela scrambled around to the back of the building. The children in the yard had heard the screams, and were looking up at the playroom.

And lying in a heap in the backyard was—

“I knew it!”

No one.

There was no one there. When Miss Angela looked up, she saw the children staring curiously.

“I’m not falling for this one!”

Miss Angela doubled back as fast as her legs could carry her, rushing into the building through the front door. And she turned to the staff members, as they stood blankly. “Where’s Carlo?”

“She didn’t pass this way. Didn’t she fall out the window?”

“That was a trick! And now we’ve got reason to give her a detention!”

With a fiendish grin, Miss Angela walked up the stairs. Her target: the playroom. She now had justification for keeping Carlo inside until dinnertime.

She walked down the hall and opened the playroom door.

“Had enough yet, Carlo?!”

*Click. Bang.*

The moment she threw open the door—

“As if!”

She spotted Carlo, who was leaning nearly all the way out the window with a confident grin.

“Wha-”

So shocked was Miss Angela that she could not finish her sentence.

“I’m surprised you made it this far. —Bye!”

Carlo disappeared.

Miss Angela rushed towards the window almost fast enough to knock the other children to the ground.

By the time she opened the window and looked outside, Carlo had already climbed down the gutter and landed safely on the ground.

Carlo looked up and smiled.

“Ha!”

She held out her arm toward Miss Angela and gave her a thumbs-up. And then she ran straight for the gates.

“...Why, you little—!”

Miss Angela spun around, sprinted past the children driven to tears by her terrifying determination, and ran down the stairs again.

When she thundered downstairs, she saw the staff standing around helplessly. Miss Angela sped past them and once again rushed out the door.

Then she saw Carlo. Carlo turned into the road, to the right. In the direction of the bus stop. As if on cue, the bus appeared.

“Not bad! But you’re not beating a bicycle for speed!”

There were still 100 meters to the bus stop. She could catch up by bike.

Miss Angela reached for her bicycle by the door. She grabbed it and turned—

“Huh?”

The bicycle wouldn’t move.

It was only then that she realized the wheels were tightly secured to the tree in the yard by countless strings.

The strings were the kind the children used to play cat’s cradle. The children who had come out earlier must have done this.

“Damn it! Don’t underestimate me!”

Miss Angela didn’t bother trying to untie the strings. She forcibly heaved the bicycle forward.

“HAH!”

With a spirited cry, she broke the strings and freed her trusty steed. Miss Angela climbed on and began pedaling furiously.

The bicycle squeaked out the gates and turned toward the bus stop.

The bus was ahead. It was just coming to a stop. The brake lights came on.

“What?”

But she did not see Carlo.

There was no one at the stop. There were no other roads in the area. Curious, Miss Angela scanned the road and her surroundings, but Carlo was nowhere to be found. On the right were the formidable orphanage walls that Carlo could not possibly climb, and the vacant lot on the left was completely empty.

Miss Angela continued to look around as she pedaled. And she braked hard at the bus stop.

The door of the bus was still open. Miss Angela turned to the middle-aged driver.

“Did someone board here? A little girl?”

“No,” the driver said, “I didn’t get any passengers today.”

“Let me take a look inside!”

“Sure, but I’m telling you...”

Miss Angela abandoned her bicycle and stepped onto the bus. The bus had only one door. All she saw inside were empty seats.

“How...?”

No one could answer her question.

Panting, Miss Angela stood in a daze.

“Is everything all right?” asked the driver.

“Yes. I’m terribly sorry... One of the children ran off from the orphanage...”

Miss Angela apologized to the driver as she stepped off the bus. The driver landed a decisive blow.

“Look here, ma’am. Even if a child had money, I wouldn’t let her on the bus alone.”

“I see... I’m terribly sorry.”

Miss Angela stepped outside with a sigh.

“I’m off!”

The driver closed the door and slowly started the empty bus.

Miss Angela stood blankly by her fallen bicycle, watching the bus leave.

The bus seemed to flash by her. The rear windshield, the spare tire, the taillights, the bumper—

—And Carlo, hanging onto the bus.

“Gah?”

Miss Angela squawked.

“Not bad, lady!” Carlo grinned, waving. Her feet were on the bumper, and her left hand was clinging to the pipe from which the spare tire hung. She was getting a free ride.

“Ah...”

Miss Angela finally understood.

That when Carlo arrived at the stop, she hadn’t boarded the bus—she had quickly crossed in front of the bus to hide herself.

Miss Angela had asked the driver if anyone had boarded, not if he had seen anyone. Carlo must have ducked and gone around the bus while Miss Angela was busy looking inside, and climbed onto the back of the bus the moment it started.

“Don’t worry!” Carlo said as the bus sped away.

The driver could not possibly see Carlo. The bus grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

The next village over, which was a little bigger than this one, was about 30 kilometers away. Miss Angela could not chase down the bus. And even if she got in touch with the other village, they would not find Carlo if she decided to jump off earlier and disappear into the crowds.

“...She got me...”

Enveloped in exhaust, Miss Angela fell to her knees at the empty bus stop.

The bus grew smaller and smaller, until it disappeared completely beyond the fields and plains.

## **Carlo's Excellent Adventure**

Actually, that wasn't the end of Carlo's story.

There was an uproar at the orphanage in the wake of Carlo's escape.

Miss Angela was completely burnt out. The staff were in a frenzy.

"She's just gone out for a bit."

No amount of questioning would pry the answers out of Carlo's friends.

The staff contacted the police at the next village, but they received no news about her.

Eventually, the summer sun finally set and dinner without Carlo had ended—

"I'm back!"

—When Carlo returned.

The staff frantically sat Carlo in a chair in the staff room. They surrounded her and showered her with questions and lectures.

Carlo replied matter-of-factly, "I just wanted to drop by the village."

Miss Angela sobbed like a ghoul as she stood before Carlo.

"Sorry, Miss Angela."

"Hic...never mind that now. ...How did you get back? There shouldn't be any more buses today..."

"I hitched a ride with a truck. I heard the driver say before that he was going to drop by the next village over today. So I met him on the way back and asked for a ride."

"I see...so you thought that far. ...I lose, Carlo. You win this round."

"C'mon, don't feel too bad. You were pretty good."

"Heh. Not bad... I must be getting old."

The middle-aged staff member sent Miss Angela away and stood before Carlo, fuming.

"Carlo! I mean, Carla! We won't let you off the hook this time!"

"I know."

"You are grounded for the next 20 days! No playtime for you. Other than mealtimes, bedtimes, and study hours, you will help out at the staff room or study. Someone will have their eye on you at all times. And if you try to play hooky or run, your sentence will get even longer."

"That's it? I expected worse."

Carlo remained as nonchalant as ever. "But," she suddenly said, sounding serious, "I can still go to the Master's farewell ceremony tomorrow, right?"

The middle-aged woman was silent for a moment. But—

"All right. You may attend the ceremony, Carla. But you must not leave our supervision at any time."

The next day.

After breakfast, Carlo and the others gathered in the classroom, which was the biggest room in the orphanage.

Chairs were lined up in the room. Before the blackboard at the front of the room was a long table. On the table was a framed picture.

It was a picture of Master Ein Morseau, scribbled in crayon on the back of a calendar.



The Master hated getting his photograph taken, and had died without leaving a single one behind. So the orphanage had to use a picture drawn by a girl who had lived there 15 years ago.

The girl, who had been five years old at the time, was adopted by someone from the Capital District not long after she drew the picture.

She had said goodbye to the Master with a kiss and a smile. She never contacted the orphanage again.

The children were gathered in the room.

So were the staff. Along with Miss Angela, who looked quite tired. The villagers were also there. The classroom was full of people.

“Let’s begin,” the middle-aged woman said loudly to the people. Behind her was the humble picture of the Master. “It is painful for us as well to send off the Master without even a single flower. But—”

“Wait!”

Carlo interrupted the ceremony.

The adults stood, surprised, and glared at her.

“Hey, can we pause the ceremony for a bit?”

“Wh-what?!” the middle-aged woman said, aghast.

“Just a little bit. Let’s just put it on hold for a little while.”

“Carlo! Haven’t you learned your lesson from yesterday?!” the middle-aged woman snapped. But—

“C’mon!”

“Just for a bit!”

“Please!”

“Can we please wait?”

The other children spoke in Carlo’s defense. They stood from their seats, asking to put the ceremony on hold.

“Wh-what is going on here...?” the middle-aged woman gasped.

The staff and the villagers looked around in confusion. But at that moment—

“Good morning! Sorry we’re late. We’re at the right place, yes?”

A young man suddenly raised his voice.

“Hm?” The staff furrowed their brows.

“Yes!”

“Yeah!”

“They’re here!”

“This is the right place!”

The children cheered.

“Sorry we’re late. It was such a big load.”

The young man was wearing an apron. And his hands were full.

“Just in time! Could you decorate the table at the front of the room?” Carlo grinned, instructing the young man—

“... You win, kid.” Miss Angela nodded, instantly recovering from her daze as something fragrant passed by her.

—A large bouquet.

“Got it! Can’t have a memorial service without some flowers.”

The young man was a florist, and he was completely oblivious to the situation. He simply did as he was told and placed colorful bouquets around the Master’s picture.

“There’s more in the truck outside. Could I get a hand?” he asked.

“All right! I’ll—”

Carlo stopped mid-sentence. She met Miss Angela’s gaze.

“Oh, right. I was grounded...” she mumbled awkwardly.

“Never mind that and go help the man, you little rascal. I’ll help too,” Miss Angela snickered.

“Haha! Ahaha!”

“Yeah! Hahahaha!”

And they ran outside, laughing together.

“Can we help too? We wanted to give flowers to the Master. Carlo spent all the money she had to do this for us. She placed an order at the next village over since we don’t have a florist here,” begged a little girl, looking up at the middle-aged woman.

The middle-aged woman squatted, hanging her head. And—

“Of course...let’s all...get those flowers—”

After that, it was hard to make out what she said between her sobs. The woman picked up the girl in her arms and followed Carlo out of the room.

“Let’s go! The guests, too!” the boy who had acted as Carlo’s diversion cried. The entire room cheered.

And so began an endless parade of flowers.

Carlo carried in a flowerpot almost as big as she was.

“See? Not bad at all, huh,” she said to the woman walking next to her.

“Heh. You win this round, but don’t think for a second you’ll take the next one,” Miss Angela said to the girl walking next to her. She was carrying an armful of flowers.

The flowery farewell ceremony went off without a hitch.

The staff used some of the flowers to decorate the orphanage, planted some in the yard, and gave some out to the guests.

“Huh. So that’s how it’s gonna be?”

“Of course. Rules are rules. You should be glad we shortened your punishment to five days.”

“Man...”

And Carlo spent a very long time in the staff room, surrounded by flowers.

**-Carlo’s Excellent Adventure: End-**





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